MANIFESTING THE INVISIBLE
THOMAS MERTON'S VISION OF CONTEMPLATIVE CHRISTIANITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Manifesting the Invisible: Thomas Merton's Vision of Contemplative Christianity in the Modern World

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The American Cistercian monk Thomas Merton was a tireless contributor to the 20th century conversations of the role of the monastic contemplative life in the modern world. His concept of the contemplative life's openness to the world and service to modernity, and indeed his understanding of his own vocation, developed significantly throughout his life, to the point that some have found it helpful to distinguish between the "early Merton" and the "later Merton." This thesis will track the changes in Merton's thought as a guide to answering the questions that captivated Merton throughout his life: what is the relationship between contemplative interiority and active struggle for justice? What is the role and function of spirituality in the modern world? Are changes in religiosity indicative of insufficiencies in the content or communication of religion? Can the contemplative life exist today as it has for centuries? I will argue that Merton's thought changed as he became immersed in a more secular modern society. The content of spiritual interiority remains the same, but its context must shift to the scene of modern alienation. Religious experience must be open to the modern collective consciousness, but the insights of modernity are not new: the mystics have always perceived God as absent, or at best mysteriously present. In the modern context, contemplative love will seek active expression in protest against the injustices of society if it is to remain authentic.

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Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen,
cannot love God whom they have not seen.

1 John 4:20

Introduction

This work is the account of a series of internal questions that are certainly not only my own; in some sense, they are questions that are at the core of the self-definition of spirituality. What is the relationship between a contemplative interiority and an active form of love, between prayer and justice? How do we respond to the comparative *realness* of the visible and the invisible, the brother and sister whom we have seen and the God whom we have not? Is there a distinction to be made at all? Is it futile even to try to define a distinction?

The Christian tradition, continuing from its Jewish predecessor, has always acknowledged a deep interaction between God and the material world, and emphasized that it is an interaction experienced by the very fact of being, in and through the self. The responses to this interaction, however, have varied greatly. There are those who have dedicated their lives entirely to an almost exclusive interiority, the hermits and monastics who "left the world" to pursue a total attention on God discovered in one's being. Conversely, there are those who have rejected any ability to know or speak of God, such as the Radical Theologians of the 20th century, who claim that any hope for religious authenticity is total iconoclasm, and that one should live as though God had died and so embrace a godless modernity. The monastic concept, also termed the "contemplative life," is most intriguing to me, and will be the focus of this thesis.

Perhaps most important in the consideration of these questions among modern monastic writers is Thomas Merton, a monk of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or Trappists, who, despite belonging to an Order known for its strict silence and seclusion, nonetheless became an important contributor to discourses on the political and social issues of the 1950s and 1960s. His writing has served as a guide for the contemplative in the modern world. His work is particularly helpful because Merton experienced a profound transformation in

his concept of contemplation as modernity largely unfolded around him while he was confined to a monastery, watching from a distance.

As the world transformed following the effects of two World Wars, with the Catholic Church responding to global changes in thought, the monastic vocation would see a series of dramatic, though not essential, alterations in the course of the Second Vatican Council. Merton lived through this restructuring of the monastic life, much of which was centered on incorporating a new sense of openness to the world among strictly cloistered religious communities. Merton was a monk who consistently sought more solitude despite a seeming inability to distance himself from the pressing concerns of the world around him. Merton saw solitude as essential to properly loving the world, and proper love of the world was, to him, a deep, prayerful service to it.

The thesis will track the changes in Merton's thought throughout his life at the Abbey of Gethsemani and will describe his social writings as a voice influenced by and loyal to monastic tradition, particularly the 12th-century writings of one of Merton's most important spiritual influences, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. I will follow Merton's reading of Bernard through the lens of theological and philosophical developments of the 20th century, which also greatly influenced his thought. Chief among these developments are the elaboration of the concept of modern alienation by the existentialists, the rise of Radical Theology (termed also the "Death of God" theology), and the precursors of Catholic liberation theology, some iterations of which captured, after Merton's death in 1968, what I take to be the spirit of Merton's developing thought throughout his life. Ultimately, I will use Merton's writings as a way to answer the broader question about the social role of a dedicated contemplative life and to elaborate a Christian spirituality responsive to the historical and social developments of modernity.

Chapter 1 | Thomas Merton and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Thomas Merton's principal early spiritual influence was the medieval Cistercian saint and Doctor of the Church, Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's corpus of mystical writing forms the foundation of Cistercian spirituality. In addition to his early fascination with Bernard's insights, Merton's responsibilities as master of novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani gave him ample reason to study Bernard in depth. Considering Bernard a saint "whom we must never dishonor by a partial or fragmentary appreciation,"[1] Merton largely modeled his early monastic life on Bernard's lessons, only later becoming even slightly distanced from Bernard in the context of his own unique vocational trajectory. Jean Leclerq notes that in addition to several biographical similarities between the two figures, Bernard and Merton shared, perhaps most importantly, a deep contemplative life that evolved into social and political involvement not characteristic of their monastic vocation, but nonetheless naturally driven by it.[2]

Two of Merton's works primarily underpin this chapter. The first, "Action and Contemplation in St. Bernard," is compiled from a series of Merton's lectures to his students in 1953 and 1954. The second, written in 1948, is Merton's commentary on various Bernardine texts concerning interior simplicity, a hallmark of monastic life. Together, these develop a view of Merton's early spiritual understanding of the monastic life as a way to shed the artificial layers of life in the modern world, an artificiality essential to the suppression of genuine love.

An important definitional distinction exists between the concept of the active life in Bernard's writings (shared by Merton's earlier evaluations of the question), and the politically

[1] Thomas Merton, "Bernard of Clairvaux, Monk and Apostle" in *Disputed Questions,* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1976), 274.
[2] Jean Leclerq, "Thomas Merton and Bernard of Clairvaux," *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990), 39.

"active" life that Merton undertook in his later years. When Bernard refers to the active life, he frequently means the apostolic life, a life of preaching and evangelization.[3] This is, importantly, a very different vocation than an "active life" in the service of social justice, unless, of course, one believes that the two are intertwined or indeed identified, and that evangelization necessitates a pursuit of social justice. Merton certainly seems to adopt this understanding such that his later political writings serve, for him, as an effluence of his spiritual life into modern society. It is an evangelization in non-religious rhetoric.[4] I will develop this theme in detail in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis.

Relatedly, another important facet of the "active" and "contemplative" terminology, especially for Merton, is its setting. A life outside the cloister has contemplative elements, and an enclosed life has active elements. As will be seen throughout the course of this study of Merton's thought, Merton's early treatment of questions of action and contemplation took the monastic setting for granted. He ponders the roles of action and contemplation for a monk within a monastery, which is itself a form of an idealized Christian community. It was later that he began to evaluate his contemplative vocation in the setting of the world as a whole, with all of its political and cultural complexity. This chapter, therefore, employs a different set of assumptions than will the following chapters. The information that most illuminates Merton's ideas regarding the active-contemplative tension is precisely the setting in which he situates the expression of his vocation.

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[3] A further distinction exists in Bernard's use of the term "active life" in a monastic context; here, the term means a monastic life engaged in fasting and other ascetic practices, the outward expressions of interior spirituality.

[4] Something similar could potentially be said for Bernard insofar as the political society of medieval Europe would have been much more intertwined with Christianity than Merton's modern secular world. The concept of the secular would have been much less opposed to the spiritual than it is today, so preaching a crusade, as Bernard did, for example, may have been a similar phenomenon (in role, certainly not in content) to Merton's engagement in social issues. As will be elaborated later, Bernard saw these preaching engagements as fruitful and necessary departures from the contemplative life.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus

For Bernard, as for much of the Church throughout history, the division of the active life and the contemplative life was exemplified by the lives of Martha and Mary, friends of Jesus mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (10:38-42). In the account, Jesus visits the home of the two sisters, and Martha immediately busies herself with preparations while Mary sits at Jesus's feet to listen to him speak. When Martha objects to Mary's attentive leisure, asking that she help instead with the preparations, Jesus responds: "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."[5] Martha serves as the example of the active life, while Mary demonstrates the merits of the contemplative life. Lazarus, the brother of the two, is often referenced as an exemplar of the penitential life, a condition symbolized by his resurrection from the dead and expressed in both the active and contemplative aspects of the monastic life: both in prayer and in work.

The comparison makes clear a preference for the life that mirrors Mary's. It is not only better in its external characteristics, but indicates a kind of preferable internal state, one that thirsts for the truths of God and seeks God as its entire fulfillment. It is characterized by an idleness that allows the soul enough repose to properly accept the truths of God. It is free of the agitations of the world and is therefore better. Insofar as Mary's choice reflects some predictable orientation of the spirit, "Mary's part should be chosen by us insofar as it lies within us."[6]

Despite a supposedly natural disposition towards Mary's contemplative tendency, the contemplative life cannot be expected of everyone. Merton is very clear that Bernard is not

[5] Lk 10:41-42 (NRSV)
[6] Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 39.

trying to discuss action and contemplation from a "speculative" point of view, but rather from a "practical" and "intimately personal" one.[7] There are some who will be able to perfect a contemplative life, and many others in a monastery who will better develop their charity by leading what essentially amounts to an active life. Indeed, in a monastic setting, what Bernard sometimes calls an active life actually corresponds, as Merton explains, to what we would consider an ascetic life: a life of "penance and laborious practice of virtue."[8] In this sense, it is an almost necessary precursor to the contemplative life.

The contemplative life, for Bernard, is the only possible setting for spiritual perfection (insofar as it can be approached, though not attained, in this life). For Merton, this understanding may be too strict. Merton takes care to make mention of the lessons of St. Teresa of Avila, which allow perhaps a little more possibility for perfection outside of pure contemplation than would Bernard. Teresa, according to Merton, notes that "even without *prayer* of mystical union a soul can arrive, by the generous practice of the virtues, at a degree of charity equal to that which is produced by…mystical contemplation."[9] The practice of the virtues, considered by Bernard an essential component of the active life, may allow for perfection in itself, instead of serving solely as a kind of preparation for the contemplative life.

The fact that Bernard considers the contemplative life as the surest path to spiritual perfection does not, however, mean that it is the best kind of life for a Christian on earth. While the contemplative life is good in itself and perfectly pleasing to God, Christian duties to the neighbor may demand a departure from contemplation, and this departure may indeed render our life less perfect but more fruitful. If done out of obedience to the will of God, an active life

[7] Ibid., 41.
[8] Ibid., 46.
[9] Ibid., 68.

flowing out of a contemplative life and interrupting a contemplative life is preferable than to remain in contemplative idleness. Merton refers to this life as the apostolic life. Bernard calls it the mixed life. This is the highest vocation, and even if it is less perfect than the pure contemplative life, it is "more difficult, more dangerous, more meritorious, more necessary, and more excellent."[10]

For this apostolic life to be authentically good, it must be a result of the grace accessed through contemplation. According to Merton, the "superiority" of the mixed life "is never verified when the mixed life is not in fact the fruit of superabundant contemplation and intimate union with God."[11] Ultimately, Merton concludes that if Martha had been both a contemplative and a penitent, if she had incorporated those attributes of Mary and Lazarus and based her activity off of them, her vocation would have been the highest.

Interior Simplicity and Union with the Divine

Merton considered his monastic life to be a realization of the fullness of his humanity, and it was precisely the contemplative atmosphere that was capable of achieving this goal. Monastic life, to Merton, was a return to interior simplicity through the elimination of illusions about the self. By simplifying life to its most essential spiritual and material necessities, the monastery returns the monk to his proper orientation toward God and affords him the capability of correcting for that mark of original sin that is an artificial complexity in life.

The value in contemplation comes from its ability to unify the human soul to God. To both Merton and Bernard of Clairvaux, the contemplative life at its core, then, was an attempt at

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 59.

unity.[12] Primarily, this means unity between God and the self, which in turn required the contemplative to rid themselves of all false selves or disordered desires. The ideal of monastic simplicity so characteristic of the Cistercian tradition was above all manifest in the ideal of a monastic vocation: those things proper to the individual's vocation ought to be cultivated, and those superfluous ambitions were only distractions.

Bernard understood original sin to be the introduction of an unintended duplicitousness to the human soul. In Eden, all the knowledge that God wished for humans to have was already given to humans. That additional knowledge that was forbidden, the knowledge that has been "superinduced" upon the "original form" of the soul, is the disruptive error by which the simplicity of the soul "is covered over by the duplicity of man's deceit, simulation, and hypocrisy."[13] The correction, then, that returns the soul to its simple nature, is to understand the self[14] and shed any deceitful illusions. Merton takes this to mean that "if the first step of the Cistercian ascent to God is for the monk to know himself, we may reasonably say that, in some sense, the whole life of such a one will consist in being himself."[15] To return to this state of union implies that "the sanctifying passivity of love that recaptures the 'taste' for heavenly things

[12] What precisely is meant by the state of unity is a complex matter that dominates mystical literature. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the precise definition of unity in Bernard's work. For the sake of clarification, however, it may be helpful to say the following:

1. Bernard commonly describes mystical union with the divine as "spousal." It is a union that requires every faculty of love of which a human is capable and carries with it the emotional implications of a perfected marital state.
2. The union, for Bernard, does not require or even imply a shedding of one's humanity. On the contrary, the wretched state of being human is an inescapable reality for the mystic, and no amount of ascetic self-renunciation can erase this condition. The state of being created by God, lesser than God, and reliant on God is the fact according to which the loving relationship is shaped. A human soul remains human even through mystical union, and therefore remains also in the world. For this reason, union may only be perceived temporarily in some mystical experience of consolation. The soul eventually returns to the world, but is nourished by the fruits of the momentary contemplative union.

[13] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 82:2-3, trans. Thomas Merton, cited in Jean-Baptiste Chautard and Thomas Merton, *The Spirit of Simplicity,* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2017), 76.

[14] The "self," in this view, could be understood as being fully contained in and constituted by God, covered and distorted by overlain complexities. "Self-renunciation," then, becomes self-discovery, because it is the abnegation of an illusory "self" in favor of a maximally simple relationship with God.

[15] Jean-Baptiste Chautard and Thomas Merton, *The Spirit of Simplicity,* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2017), 79.

through the secret interior action of the Holy Spirit repairs the disaster of original sin."[16] Under this conception of the corruption of humanity, the purpose of the Cistercian vocation has, as its "chief" and "only task" on earth, "to get rid of the double garment, the overlaying layer of duplicity that is not ourselves."[17]

The basis of any preference for a contemplative life over an active one is the determination that such a life constitutes the most complete and most intimate union with God, the closest experience of unity that a soul can know on Earth. It may be tempting to stop here. Once the contemplative has reached this interior simplicity, they have perfected their spirit. Perhaps akin to a state of enlightenment, one can rest in this state of unity. Such a conclusion about the contemplative life is precisely the impression that opens it up to accusations of uselessness to society, and therefore to excessive self-focus. Of course, a contemplative whose life is focused entirely on "dying to the self" for the sake of total belonging to God cannot be said to be acting "selfishly," properly speaking. But the question that naturally follows is whether God desires to be loved (or even *can be* loved) in isolation, or whether the nature of love is such that love for God requires, necessarily, attention to other people.[18]

Importantly, the distinctive character of Bernard's treatment of the primacy of contemplation, that which Merton repeatedly emphasizes as he discusses Bernard, is that union, while the purpose of the contemplative life, is not in itself the highest value in a Christian life. While the most important end of a Christian life is never elegantly defined in those of Bernard's writings that Merton cites, Merton zeroes in on a key implication that while contemplative union is most pleasing to God, it may be subservient to other demands. Merton notes that "unlike St.

[16] Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 55.
[17] Ibid.
[18] This question will be addressed at length in the fourth chapter.

John of the Cross," another of Merton's spiritual influences, "St. Bernard does not here argue that… 'a very little of this pure love [when a soul has reached contemplative union] is more precious in the sight of God and the soul and of greater profit to the Church… than are all these other [outward] works.'"[19] Instead, Merton emphasizes that for Bernard, "the contemplative life is good, indeed, but the apostolic life is better."[20] Bernard's basic treatment of this question was later echoed by Thomas Aquinas[21] and formed the basis for the Catholic Church's understanding of the contemplative vocation: "the zeal of apostolic souls, flowing from contemplative union with God, leads to an activity that is in a sense higher than and preferable to contemplation."[22]

The unavoidable implication of these reflections is that for Bernard, and consequently for Merton, there is a value higher than pure contemplative union. This activity that is itself the fruit of contemplation is what Merton chooses to call the "apostolic life," a term substituted for Bernard's concept of the "mixed life."[23] The apostolic life, in Merton's understanding of Bernard, consists primarily in the care for souls, whether through the administration of Sacraments or through preaching and pastoral care. While both Bernard and Merton are quick to defend the merit of prayerful idleness, for the sweetness of this union to be given up for the sake of service to the Church (or other people in general) in the form of apostolic action is more pleasing to God than to remain idle in contemplative prayer. Notably, while this determination expresses a clear primacy for the spiritual over the material to the point that material welfare seems disregarded, it is not a paradigm of individualistic interiority for which the contemplative life is sometimes wrongly criticized.[24] Merton is certainly sensitive to the possibility of

[19] Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 49.
[20] Ibid., 50.
[21] For Aquinas's treatment of the question, see *Summa Theologiae,* IIa IIae q. 182 a. 2
[22] Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 38.
[23] Ibid., 42.
[24] Those readers familiar with the Buddhist Bodhisattvas may find here a wonderful parallel.

selfishness in a contemplative life. He states that "St. Bernard definitely believes that the contemplative life is 'for ourselves' and the mixed life is 'for others.'"[25] In what is perhaps his most forceful statement on the matter, Merton expresses that "a perfection that ends in ourselves, that does not contribute to the growth of the whole Christ, is not Christian sanctity."[26]

This insight, however, seems to pose two problems: the first is that if, as Merton clearly contends, simplicity is the core purpose of the Cistercian vocation, and if union is a lesser good than apostolic action, we must have an account of how and why simplicity would contribute to apostolic action. The second is that if Merton and Bernard emphasize so strongly the importance of an outward spirituality, the contemplation of the pure contemplative, still lauded by both men, cannot help but to seem insular, and we run into a seeming contradiction. Along the same lines, the rarity of apostolic action among contemplatives might imply that those contemplatives not dedicated to apostolic activity have necessarily fallen short of perfection, but this is a conclusion that both Merton and Bernard would strongly reject. Bernard's explanation of the process of arriving at interior simplicity through self-knowledge and abandonment of self-will resolves the first problem and will set the stage for Merton's resolution of the second. [27]

The Unity of Wills and Simple Intention

[25] Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 62.
[26] Ibid., 61.
[27] Merton and Bernard both agree that even a contemplation that is "for the self" is not valueless; as discussed through the story of Martha and Mary, it is in itself most pleasing to God because it is an intimate union of love. In this sense, it has an astronomical value. But Merton seeks also to expand upon the value of this life for the broader Church. In this regard, he may slightly deviate from Bernard and instead turn to St. Teresa of Avila, the Carmelite mystic who taught that "by their lives of prayer and penance, the contemplative nuns were to make reparation for the great heresies that were then dividing the Church, and they were to bring down grace upon the apostles whose mission it was to deal directly with souls." (*Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 61.) The intercessory value of the contemplative life will be developed further in the next chapter.

The monastic life provides in its cloister and simplicity the space necessary to orient all of a monk's being to God. In no way is this more readily accomplished than in the abandonment of the monk's own self-will. The process of abandoning self-will in favor of a will in harmony with God's was a central focus of the writing of Bernard of Clairvaux, and it was a feature in which Merton took great interest, particularly because it seemed, at least in theory, to settle much of the conflict between his cloistered life and his orientation towards the world.

Bernard writes that the abandonment of self-will is the ultimate recognition of the freedom of the soul submitted to God. Against a changeless and eternal law, Bernard argues, a finite self-will that has no hope of righteousness becomes a heavy burden to the obstinate soul which will, in this condition, "suffer the bitter tyranny of self."[28] Writing of Christ's example of supplication to the Father's will and reflecting on the Agony in the Garden, Bernard notes that even if our personal will is good, it is better still to yield to the will of God, which is more perfect:

> Both [Christ's] will and [his] judgement were good. And they were both his: But it was nonetheless right that they be given up, in order that something still more good might be accomplished. Therefore, when Christ said, 'If it be possible, let the chalice pass from me,' (Mt 26:39) that was his will, and it was good. But the will with which he said, "Thy will be done" was better because it was common to the Father, to Christ himself, and to us.[29]

What Christ has willed is the will of the Father. And in this case, Christ did so in the perfect expression of his divine sonship, always reliant on the Father for guidance. Christ expressed, on the Mount of Olives, the worry characteristic of his humanity and the supplication of a son. He gave to God his very self.

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[28] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God,* Chapter XIII, Christian Classics Ethereal Library Online, https://ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god/loving_god.xv.html

[29] Bernard of Clairvaux, Third Paschal Sermon, trans. Thomas Merton, cited in Chautard and Merton, *The Spirit of Simplicity*, 103.

Merton identifies this attitude as perfection of what he calls a "pure intention." He notes, again inspired by Bernard's emphasis on self-knowledge, that "what God wants of me is myself… His will for me points to one thing: the realization, the discovery, the fulfillment of myself."[30] And once one has perfectly loved the will of God as expressed in the self, one has developed a pure intention. This state "is a union so close that God Himself both utters and fulfills His will at the same instant in the depths of my soul… The action is at once perfectly mine and perfectly His," and all that one does is perfectly pleasing to God. The implications of such a realization, to Merton, are the solution (in theory) to the seeming tension between a contemplative life and one dedicated to social action (or any kind of action, for that matter):

> This fact tends to resolve the antinomy between action and contemplation. 'Action' is no longer a matter of resigning ourselves to the works that seem alien to our life in God: For the Lord Himself places us exactly where He wants us to be and He Himself works in us. 'Contemplation' is no longer the brief, satisfying interlude of reward in which our works are relieved by recollection and peace. Action and contemplation… become two aspects of the same thing. Action is charity looking outward to other men, and contemplation is charity looking inward to its own divine source.[31]

The pursuit of perfect charity in the monastery, then, accomplished through the renunciation of self-will, among other things, ensures that one's life steeped in love of God will be pleasing to God, fulfilling one's obligations to God through pure contemplation, but also through the proper love of neighbor.

The demands to physically serve the "least of Christ's brethren" as a condition according to which one will be judged[32] still does not seem perfectly addressed by these formulations, particularly if one determines that God has not willed one's being to be of active service to the least among them. Indeed, many of Merton's later writings, his less formal writings, and his

[30] Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island,* (Garden City: Image Books, 1967), 61.
[31] Ibid., 65.
[32] Mt 25

ideas for monastic renewal contain a pervasive dissatisfaction with the idea that such an exclusively spiritual orientation is even a possible form of being willed by God. Merton, seemingly still exploring this question, gives another attempt at an answer when he reasons that in perfecting one's intention and living a life willed by God, one must sacrifice not only "what is evil in itself, but also *all of the precise goods that are not willed for us by God*. (Merton's emphasis)"[33] It is not an answer to Merton's spiritual conflict so much as an answer to a general question about the proper orientation of the Christian life.

In essence, Merton's central question doesn't seem to be a theoretical one so much as a personal one. Within his personal experience of the monastic vocation, the theoretical answers are unsatisfactory. There's a spiritual pull outward that, as we will see later, is manifest in what almost seems to be a sense of guilt at his seclusion. Some further insights from Bernard that identify in the monastic life a deep potential for solidarity with one's suffering neighbor may have assisted Merton in resolving some of this guilt, but there seems to be, nonetheless, an unfulfilled spiritual burden than follows Merton in every stage of his life.

Self-Knowledge and Solidarity

To Bernard, self-knowledge is not an objective to be pursued for its own sake; it is rather a condition necessary for the contemplation of Truth in its purest form, its "essential nature."[34] Importantly, the knowledge of the self is necessary insofar as it allows a proper orientation towards the neighbor, and only through understanding of the neighbor can one hope to understand truth in its essential nature. Christ's emphatic insistence on solidarity, most dramatically communicated by his own acceptance of human suffering and the human form,

[33] Merton, *No Man is an Island,* 111.
[34] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride,* trans. Barton R.V. Mills, Chapter 3.

demonstrates to Bernard that the means of understanding Truth is by an understanding of those around us. "[L]et Him who is the Truth teach you that you must search for truth in those around you before you look for it in its intrinsic purity. You will afterwards learn why you must search for it in yourself before you do so in your neighbors."[35]

To know "Him who is the Truth," one must know suffering and solidarity, for Bernard understands that the very nature of God as expressed in Christ is uniquely one of suffering for the sake of the experience of human anguish. God, who knew of suffering, had not himself experienced it until he was made human in the fullness of compassion and mercy. Bernard expresses here that the incarnation of Christ happened "in order that He might learn by personal experience to pity and to feel for those who similarly suffer and are tempted."[36] Instead of condemning the fallen state of humanity, God chose to take it upon himself. For Bernard, then, the knowledge of God, who is the fullness of love, is incomplete without the knowledge of mercy, and the completeness of mercy cannot be known until one has imitated the merciful, compassionate behavior of Christ – namely, to suffer alongside one's neighbor and rejoice when they rejoice.

The compassionate suffering alongside one's neighbor that is essential to the understanding of pure truth is achieved by self-knowledge, which reveals to us our own wickedness, a condition in which we can be moved to misery and rendered entirely reliant on God. Bernard recognizes that one cannot hope to share another's misery if one does not oneself feel the depths of that misery. But this sadness is available to all, since we are all in some way flawed and susceptible to error. If we are to understand the sufferings of others, we "must recognize [our] own evil state, which you may see reproduced in your neighbor, and may thus

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

know how to help him."[37] Solidarity, which in modern times has been adopted as one of the principle tenets of Catholic social teaching (whose primary focus is, of course, social justice and the active pursuit of human improvement), is described by Bernard of Clairvaux as an indispensable characteristic of the contemplative. And thus, the potential for a monastic life to spill into social action does not seem so far-fetched.

Bernard's esteem for solidarity does not merely arise from the fact that it assists in our ability to know God; Bernard sees it as a good in itself because it is an expression of love of neighbor. According to Bernard, it is this "brotherly love" that calls a person out of contemplation and into action, even if it means great longing for the contemplative turned apostle.

Distinctions

Despite his near-total agreement with Bernard, Merton nonetheless experienced difficulties accepting the Mellifluous Doctor's spiritual teachings as a complete guide. Chrysogonus Waddell, another monk at Gethsemani and contemporary of Merton's, had the following to say about his relationship with Bernard:

> As he was to write to his mentor and close friend Mark Van Doren in 1962, "the safe I can no longer stomach" (CRJ, p. 45. Letter of Aug. 9, 1962). Just so. And who was as "safe" as Bernard of Clairvaux? Bernard who was the champion of orthodoxy. Bernard who always knew what the score was. Bernard the arbiter of political and theological correct thinking.[38]

The "safe," as Merton described it, fell short not on a logical level (for Merton seems to agree with just about every spiritual dynamic that Bernard describes), but perhaps on the level of a presupposition.

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Chrysogonus Waddell, "Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux," *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992), 128.

Whether one must be a spiritual master, having fully and properly renounced the self, whether one must be so deeply immersed in love of God as to want nothing besides God and God's will, in order to prudently engage in service to one's neighbor – this seems to be the source of Merton's doubt. It is clear in Bernard, and indeed in Merton's reading of Bernard, that this is the prescribed course of action for the monastic contemplative. "We must by all means resist the temptation to pour out our ideas upon others when we ourselves have not yet been filled by the Holy Spirit or called by him to the apostolate," says Merton after analyzing Bernard's teachings on the apostolate.[39] And this is quite logical, in Merton's consideration, from a spiritual point of view: "we cannot give others what we do not have ourselves."[40] Not even a good, selfless intention or desire to serve our neighbor can make a premature apostolate a good choice. Merton is rather definitive in his assertion that "we cannot urge ourselves on to this false apostolate by arguing that 'charity seeketh not her own,' and by arguing that we are obliged to put the good of others before our own advantage."[41] We can be left with no doubt that Merton rejected a view of the contemplative life as a selfish one. On the contrary, he seems to have genuinely considered it a way of life oriented towards perfect selflessness, an inevitable result of and contributor to perfect charity. We can be equally confident in Merton's firm belief that apostolic action – that is, preaching and the care for souls – requires a developed and cherished interiority.

One ultimate distinction between Merton and Bernard may help to clarify why, despite Merton's extreme admiration for him, Bernard was not a perfect guide. Following from these reflections, it seems that Merton's problem stemmed perhaps not so much from a tension

[39] Merton, *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard,* 65.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

between the active life and the contemplative life as it did from Bernard's overpowering emphasis, in any kind of life, on the spiritual good over the material good. Merton's understanding of the importance of the contemplative spiritual life, especially in the modern world, is rarely matched; this will be explored in depth in the next chapter. But Bernard's almost exclusive focus on the spiritual role of a Christian is perhaps a source of difficulty to Merton. For example, whereas Bernard sees solidarity in an almost exclusively spiritual light (one can suffer alongside one's neighbor by reflecting on one's own spiritual wretchedness and sinfulness), Merton's instinct is to identify a parallel between Christ's crucifixion and the condition of the urban poor in Harlem. In his 1948 poem "Aubade: Harlem," he writes that "in the sterile jungles of waterpipes and ladders/… Daylight has driven iron spikes,/ into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet:/ Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem."[42] This, of course, long predates the Latin American Christology of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s that would identify in the poor a figure of the crucified Christ; or rather in Christ a figure of the crucified poor. It is Merton's organic and original spiritual instinct, and it is, as such, nearly inescapable in all of his spiritual life. Merton was certainly deeply perturbed by material injustice and inequality before entering the Abbey of Gethsemani and in his early years there, as demonstrated by this poem. His lack of focus on such things in his more spiritual works does not indicate a chronic inattention to the world, but perhaps a somewhat competing Bernardine view that may have captivated his attention for a time.

Waddell would continue in his evaluation of Merton's relationship with Bernard of Clairvaux: "If the choice be between the Establishment and the marginalized, the

[42] Thomas Merton. "Aubade – Harlem." *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton.* (New York: New Directions, 1948).

disenfranchised, who of us would opt for the Establishment? And Bernard, for Fr. Louis, came in time to mean the Establishment."[43] The "Establishment" was that ideology that was so frequently criticized by theologies emerging in Merton's lifetime, precisely that which seemed to separate the supernatural from the natural. As will be explored in much detail in the chapters that follow, Merton came to consider this separation to be a great source of falsity and charade in the spiritual practices of many Christians. Merton was not afraid to express some open iconoclasm, and it was precisely in a distinction between the spiritual and the material that he identified the greatest danger for idolatry. This does not by any means imply that Merton perceived any insincerity in Bernard; instead, it was perhaps too easy to misinterpret Bernard. To take Bernard's spiritual insights and apply them to a modern world that had largely lost the depths of Bernadine mysticism meant an almost inevitable reduction of the Saint's teachings into a paradigm for an idle spiritual life that could perhaps be truly described as exclusively inward. The modern world had begun to assign to social ills and material injustices the deep kind of emotional attention that Bernard afforded to spiritual realities. As such, Bernard may have come to represent, for Merton, a kind of spiritual ideal that had become mostly inaccessible but that nonetheless provided insights for the construction of a new spirituality proper to a modern person. The duty of the contemplative in this new modern context, then, was to keep Bernard alive and to find in medieval mysticism the remedies for modern social problems while accepting the modern systems of valuation, perceptions of reality, and social existence. Merton would seek to rewrite, and indeed to relive, Bernard's wisdom in modern terms.

[43] Waddell, "Merton and Bernard," 128.

Chapter 2 | The Contemplative's Service to the Modern World

This chapter seeks to find some practical benefit of the contemplative life for those whose life is not fully dedicated to contemplation. In this sense, it is perhaps the truest attempt to answer the question that underlies this thesis. Yet this very endeavor, to find a practical benefit of cloistered contemplation, contradicts much writing on the contemplative life and the esteem articulated by centuries of pious Christians, who find some self-contained purity in contemplative life that has been lost in the world. Perhaps the idea that there is a practical use for the contemplative life implicitly denies its essential goodness by denying that it is sufficient *per se*. Perhaps this life requires no additional justification. Nevertheless, Merton could not help but try to find one steeped in the realities of modernity.

In his later writings, Thomas Merton revealed that the modern world placed him in a philosophical context that begged for a different answer to the classic questions that underlie the monastic existence. Far from thinking such a context is to be refuted for a return to older ways of thought (those content with a self-contained cloister), the transition in Merton's understanding of his monastic vocation reveals that he had, in a sense, found this modern society to be unignorable. At some point, the romanticism of monastic life and the tendency to shun the world and the city had worn off, and Merton found himself supplying new answers. "As long as I imagine that the world is something to be 'escaped' in a monastery—that wearing a special costume and following a quaint observance takes me 'out of this world,' I am dedicating my life to an illusion."[44]

[44] Thomas Merton, "Is the World a Problem?" in *Contemplation in a world of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1971), 145.

Merton is quite open about the fact that the work that catapulted him into literary prominence, *The Seven Story Mountain,* in which he expressed a certain disdain for the city and a resultant call to solitude, was not an adequate expression of his later thinking. He had even described it as having been written by an unrecognizable author. The central change in Merton, shown in most of his writings on monastic renewal, is his embrace of the world. It is not something to be shunned. It is not something to be escaped.

> Rejection of the world, 'contempt for the world'… results in a crudely automatic polarization: everything that happens outside the cloister is considered hateful… Everything that happens in the cloister… is wise, pleasing to God, full of redemptive power, and supremely significant… This disordered interpretation of the gospel texts about renouncing the world in our own hearts becomes an excuse for pharisaical complacency. Contemplatives despise the world because they imagine themselves to be superior to it in every way. The cloister is a guarantee of that superiority. If they resume contact with the world, they lose that superiority and become like everyone else.[45]

Merton acknowledges that such a characterization is a caricature of true attitudes, but it nonetheless illuminates a very real potential for problems in the Church's service to the world. In his later life, much of Merton's esteem for his contemplative life came from his identification of its potential for service to the world, and from his own spiritual insertion into the world despite his physical removal from it. The contemplative life as a self-contained good no longer seemed to be an adequate means for Merton to live out Christian love. To answer these inner questions, Merton grounds the purposes and realities of the contemplative life in the modern experience of alienation, spiritualizing "the desert" so as to be immersed in the material realities of exclusion and marginalization.

Has modernity hopelessly lost its faith such that it is a kind of blasphemy to embrace it? Or is the embrace of modernity, with its secularism and waning attention to spiritual matters, an

[45] Thomas Merton, "Openness and Cloister," in *Contemplation in a World of Action,* 132.

expression of perseverant charity, a refusal to abandon a world that most needs meaning? Merton, and indeed I, would likely argue the latter. As such, the following reflections on the role of the contemplative life, those that Merton may have considered justifications for his own participation in it, will prove useful.

Return of the Human's Value

It is clear that to Merton, the world encouraged some perversion of human worth to which contemplative solitude provided a remedy. As discussed in the first chapter, Merton drew heavily on Bernard's evaluation of the human as essentially simple. An image of God, the human could be fulfilled by a return to the simplicity of untarnished love. Any complexity beyond that interior simplicity was a distortion. Contemplation was a simplification, a conscious shedding of artificial complexities and a return to the simplicity of love that constitutes a human being. While Merton doesn't seem totally at ease with the idea that solitude could exist as an end in itself, his emphasis of this point might be an indication that is does have a self-contained value.

The contemplative life is the full acknowledgement of the fact that a human has infinite value by nature, and necessarily by reference to its relationship with God. It is, in a sense, an individual's discovery of the totality of that value experienced in itself. Merton believes that "we must find ourselves not in the froth stirred up by the impact of our being upon the beings around us, but in our own soul which is the principle of all our acts."[46] Because "the soul is hidden and invisible," it makes itself discoverable by acting; but its activity must not be taken to be the fullness of being, only a reflection of it.[47] Merton contends that as a person tries to find themselves in their "doing" rather than in their "being," this look into the mirror of the soul

[46] Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island,* (Garden City: Image Books, 1967), p. 97.
[47] Ibid., 97-98.

results in a kind of split consciousness. The subjective, interior, and experienced self is separated from the objective, evaluated self that is defined by the fruits of activity, and the former is eventually given up in favor of the latter: "The less he is able to *be,* the more he has to *do*. He becomes his own slave driver—a shadow whipping a shadow to death because it cannot produce reality, infinitely substantial reality, out of its own nonentity."[48] The only reparation, Merton claims, is that embraced by the contemplative life: to give up a pursuit of utility and to be content with the expression of *being* that is contained wholly within the self.

These reflections, published in 1955, certainly seem to belong to the earlier, more piously inward-looking corpus of Merton's writings. They are nonetheless accompanied by the steadfast conviction that solitaries, despite their solitude and their capability to exist wholly in solitude, must still necessarily live for others. Merton understands contemplation as "lov[ing] men in God," as opposed to the active life's focus of "lov[ing] God in men."[49] Thus, the key to understanding Merton's self-oriented view of the contemplative life is, I think, to view it as part of a communally oriented identity. He sharply criticizes a contemplative life that is not centered on this understanding, especially later in his life.[50] In a November 1959 letter to the Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal,[51] he expresses:

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[48] Ibid., 98-99.
[49] Ibid., 133.
[50] See the essay "Openness and Cloister," In *Contemplation in a World of Action.*
[51] Merton's friendship with Cardenal and their goals for the transformation of monastic life are extremely illuminating. Before leaving they abbey due to health problems, Cardenal was a novice at Gethsemani under Merton's tutelage. The two planned a new model for monastic living that involved the laity, particularly the marginalized poor. While Merton never received permission from Rome to leave Gethsemani and found the community with Cardenal, Cardenal founded a small quasi-monastic artist's community on the archipelago of Solentiname in Lake Nicaragua. It was a place where the peasants in the surrounding communities stayed for spiritual renewal, and where Cardenal developed his brand of liberation theology before his church was burned to the ground by the Somoza regime in 1977. Cardenal was defrocked in 1985 by Pope John Paul II for having assumed political office as minister of culture in the Sandinista government.

> The inertia of conventional religious life is like a deep sleep from which one only awakens from time to time, to realize how deeply he has been sleeping. Then he falls back into it. It is true that God works here also, but there are so many influences to deaden and falsify the interior life. A kind of perpetual sclerosis. The psalms become more and more full of meaning when one realizes that they do *not* apply to the conventional situation, but to another kind of situation altogether. The psalms are for poor men, or solitary men, or men who suffer: not for liturgical enthusiasts in a comfortable, well-heated choir.[52]

The contemplative life, in Merton's view, is kept authentic through a kind of suffering, and cannot otherwise avoid pretense. Bernard might have expressed this as the result of the "severe self-scrutiny" at the core of the penitent life, which reveals to the contemplative the universally wretched condition of humankind.[53] The result, Bernard says, is compassion.[54] In his correspondence with Cardenal, Merton frames the authentic religious life as one defined by the same kind of solidarity. The solidarity makes the contemplation communal, and from the communal focus might come the fruit of apostolic action. In keeping with Bernard's thought, Merton understands that people who center themselves in solitude have received the tools necessary for apostolic work. Part of that apostolic work in Merton's life was the adaptation of the contemplative tradition to the modern world, largely as a response to spiritual atrophy and social exclusion. The latter is particularly important. In the letter quoted above, one cannot help but notice Merton's evident disdain for material comfort in religious life. This aversion to the "bourgeois"[55] characteristics of religious expression implies an associated special compassion for the materially—and not just spiritually—poor. Notably, as I will explain later in detail, his recognition of the fact that material necessity imposes an inescapable condition of heightened

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[52] Thomas Merton to Ernesto Cardenal, 18 November 1959, in *From the Monastery to the World*, trans. and ed. Jessie Sandoval (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), 50.
[53] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride,* trans. Barton R.V. Mills, Chapter 3.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Merton doesn't use this term directly to describe the "comfortable, well-heated choir," but uses it in the next paragraph of the letter in reference to the ideals expressed in the architecture of the opulent, newly completed National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, which he describes as "a big substantial bank."

activity that does not coexist easily with contemplative idleness leads him to reconsider the nature of modernity's most salient form of alienation, and therefore the contemplative's role in the modern world.

The Contemplative Life as a Response to Alienation

Merton's understanding of modern society largely reflected some of the themes that pervaded existentialist thought, and he saw the monastic life as a remedy. For Merton, the fundamental problem facing the church was a pathology of spirituality in general; it was "the problem of inauthenticity—we're not really living out of our own personal freedom (true self) but are controlled, manipulated, and contrived by the conveyor belt of productivity, efficiency, and wealth."[56]

Contemplatives, removed from "the world" and immersed in solitude, in some sense liberate themselves from self-alienation by creating a context in which the external "objective" view of the self becomes irrelevant. In solitude, contemplatives seek to understand themselves as through the eyes of God. To describe a precise theological concept of the "self" as related to and understood through and by God is far beyond the scope of this analysis, but it is nonetheless important to note that it is perhaps this understanding of the self that the contemplative can access. The contemplative, whose identity is increasingly known in its relation to God, is more and more conformed to a view that their "self" is constituted by simple being. Being, in a Christian understanding of creation, is a direct result of God's loving. Thus, a contemplative, whose sole pursuit is to deepen their grasp and immersion in God's love, simplifies their being to this essential fact. The "spousal union" that is often talked about in mystical literature is the

[56] Ephrem Arcement, "Thomas Merton, Saint Bernard, and the Prophetic Dimension of Monasticism in the early Twenty-First Century," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 51 (2016): 4, 454.

entire dependence of one's being upon a God who is pure Being, who is simultaneously pure love, and whose creatures, described as having been made in God's image and understood to have resulted simply from love, might also return to their intended simplicity of pure being in relation to God, with no dependence upon any other object. The need to understand the self through any other relationship or any other action is, therefore, eliminated.

This dynamic might, then, solve one of the identity problems described by modern existentialism, the problem of a person's alienation from themselves. The alienation results from the fact that, situated in a world surrounded by others, a person's understanding of the self that is informed only by their own subjective perception is incomplete. The objective perception of the self, that which originated from outside the self in a third-person perspective, can only be authentically revealed by the external being. As a view of the self monopolized by the Other, the objective element of the self is fundamentally inaccessible to the self. This objective dimension is, of course, a social dimension. It relies to some inevitable extent on a person's function in a society. The objective view is, therefore, a kind of framing of the self in terms of "doing" rather than "being." In Merton's view, a person might overcompensate for this alienation by attempting to embrace the objective self in its entirety, and thus define their being in terms of their doing, resulting in the split that further degrades the spiritual life.

It begins to become clear why the contemplative can free themselves from such socially dependent alienation: the contemplative seeks an identity reliant only on being. It is also clear that the realization of such a reorientation of self-understanding would thrive in a degree of solitude and idleness. In these conditions, a person can begin to build up an identity divorced from productivity or relation to another.

Merton seems to recognize that the expression of alienation described above might be eclipsed by another more macro-level alienation less readily addressed by a cloistered contemplative life: the alienation from the world that is imposed especially by social class. He notes that "we… live in a society that needs large numbers of its members to be alienated, and which also needs slums into which it can dump those who, for one reason or another, can't face up to the competition of living affluently."[57] Here, Merton associates the helplessness and powerlessness of those "dumped" into the slum with an increasing degree of alienation. The more one is subjected, the less power one has to create the world in which one finds oneself. The less creative potential a person is allowed, the more it may seem to that person that the world is happening to them rather than being built and defined by them. I'll refer to this kind of alienation as "alienation from the world" and the form discussed above as "alienation from the self."

Alienation from the self takes on a kind of inevitability in Merton's later writing. Yes, the contemplative life might provide an answer, but the cloistered contemplative life is not available to all. Alienation from the self is a kind of psychological fact of modern existence, particularly for those who have no option of leisure. Those able to resolve this philosophical problem for themselves in a contemplative atmosphere might still be able to remind the others that a bleak existence is not inescapable. At least this might enkindle some kind of hope, or it may inspire some to act on the conclusions of such a self-redefining exercise: that there is a sort of identification between God and the human, that they are capable of being really, and not merely symbolically or imaginatively, intertwined. "The solitary," according to Merton "reminds [people] of what is theirs to use if they can manage to extricate themselves from the web of myths and fixations" in which modern society has trapped them.[58] A person in the world may not

[57] Merton, "Christian Solitude," in *Contemplation in a world of Action,* 238.
[58] Ibid., 241

feel the weight of a release from alienation, but they may potentially look upon the contemplative as proof that liberation from alienation is possible.

In his essay "Christian Solitude," Merton elaborates the theme of boredom as a scourge of modern culture. Perpetual boredom threatens all people, and this state is exploited by any who may profit off of it. In this way, the boredom is exacerbated and cemented. Merton does not explicitly link boredom to alienation, but one can begin to identify in his reflections the sense that boredom is a result of alienation from the world, particularly as he links it to "futility," and identifies one possible antidote as "fruitful work."[59]

The hermit, on the contrary, "faces boredom squarely *with no other resources than those he has within himself* – his own capacities and God's grace" (emphasis Merton's).[60] The solitary defeats futility precisely by abandoning a desire for utility. The God to which all love is directed is found in the hermit's being, a mysterious meaning that protests against all illusions of meaninglessness, an upender of an alienating world that is automatically and inexorably present in every person.

Nevertheless, this witness doesn't seem to be satisfactory for Merton, not least because it may not take seriously enough the fact that this alienation is largely *imposed,* and that liberation is not a simple matter of refusal.[61] It is also possible that the contemplative's witness may not overcome social despair precisely because it seems so foreign. Perhaps a lay person can look upon the monk and be convinced of new depths of liberated existence, but they might never be convinced that such a life is accessible to them in the world. If it is unavailable, it essentially rings hollow; it is useless. Merton seems to have two answers to this uncertainty: the first

[59] Ibid., 243
[60] Ibid., 244
[61] It's more of a complicated matter of refusal, because the issue is so ubiquitous.

maintains a privileged role for physical solitude, arguing that it demonstrates a simplicity that can be replicated in a "worldly" environment. The second spiritualizes solitude and places the scene of its modern fulness among the masses.

Merton notes that solitude might be a particularly effective environment in which to demonstrate a person's ability to shed socially imposed requirements of conformity. It is particularly effective precisely because it proves that a person can function, indeed actualize, with nothing but that knowledge, authenticity, simplicity, and love that they possess simply by virtue of being human. The solitary has nothing else upon which to rely. If they can be fulfilled in solitude, how much more can a person escape their alienation in the midst of the love they have come to know socially? "Fulfillment in solitude must not, of course, imply that solitude is the only way," but demonstrates the extreme to which detachment is possible.[62] The Christian ideal is essentially a social one, a participation in the Church. Solitude does not represent a special instance of Christian perfection; it represents an extreme that uncovers the path to Christian fulfillment by illuminating it in the simplest of circumstances. It is the schematic image of intrapersonal Christian fulfillment. It is simultaneously a witness that the end towards which it directs the social Christian is indeed possible. "The grace of solitude is a grace of independence," it is a testament to the fact that it is possible to escape the yoke of an alienating society, and it demonstrates how, once that yoke is removed, one might find the highest value in what is left: the self and the relationship with God known through the self.

The presence of others, an immersion in the world, offers support for a person seeking Christian fulfillment because the Christian life is a communal life. Solitary existence is not the archetype of monastic life. It is an attempt at perfect Christian community stripped of frivolity.

[62] Merton, "Christian Solitude," 246

As St. Benedict of Nursia envisioned it, the monastic life had important communal elements. Its aim was to simplify, not to separate. The eremitic life is a special call that is not better than an engaged life.[63] The solitary does not live for themselves. They live primarily for others through love of God. The hermitage is a total act of love for God, "and this witness is at the same time the purest act of love for other men, my gift to them, my contribution to their joy in the good news of Jesus Christ and to their awareness that the Kingdom of Christ is in the midst of us."[64]

While effective, this answer seems only take Merton so far, for he consistently expresses particular regard for a brand of Christian solitude meant to exist "in the cities," as was the aim of the mendicant Orders and others that have come about more recently. The second answer that Merton provides to a potentially deficient witness of Christian fulfillment is simply to move contemplation into a new atmosphere more in tune with modern alienation. To do this requires a redefinition of "solitude" to mean a kind of spiritual isolation rather than physical one – essentially, alienation. Merton has a special affinity for Franciscan spirituality (he sought to enter the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin before he was directed by a Franciscan vocations director to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance), and frequently mentions the Little Brothers of Jesus, a quasi-monastic urban Order founded by Bl. Charles de Foucauld. The latter, for Merton, signals an important shift in the context of monastic solitude to more adequately respond to the psycho-spiritual reality of modern society, a reality displayed most viscerally in urban exclusion, that is to say, in the slum.[65] An in-depth consideration of the Little Brothers' spirituality, while extremely interesting, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, Merton's

[63] This relationship is explored in detail in the first chapter.
[64] Merton, "Christian Solitude." 250.
[65] When I use the terms "slum" or "city" or "urban," I hope to convey a sense of contemplation among non-contemplatives, insertion in the world and immersion in alienation, rather than the literal settings. Likewise, the "desert" does not refer to a literal desert but is rather a symbol of removal from society and distance from the world.

treatment of the group sheds light on an important dynamic: the contemplative life in the modern world might be adequately situated in the midst of society.

The Slum: Forced Alienation and the Locus of Modern Contemplation

The Christian "in the world" might well look upon the example of the monk and recognize the potential for fulfillment in God, but how is such an example to be effective in the midst of the oppressive weight of society's ironclad system of forced alienation? How is one to withdraw from conditions of exclusion and the entrapment implied by it? "The slum," says Merton, "is the abode of utter loneliness, risk, helplessness: a true desert."[66] The contemplative's response, then, might be to contemplate alongside an alienated modern humanity. The contemplative must be immersed in the realities of alienation in its present iterations. The desert may have become, today, a sort of artificial alienation, an inauthentic one.

The slum, as the pinnacle of modern humanity's dejectedness, must become the context in which the contemplative restores a sense of worth to society. What good is a reminder of utility and worth if it comes from a seeming artificiality? Recalling Merton's correspondence with Cardenal, it is clear that Merton understood that the pleasures denied to the alienated poor extended far beyond the physical necessities and were experienced in a spiritual realm: a feeling of trapped-ness, monotony – and Merton could only awaken from the "spiritual sclerosis" of artificial monasticism when immersed in this reality. The contemplative in the slum experiences solitude; they experience all of the risk and challenge of isolation and exclusion, all the loneliness and helplessness that exposes a person's dependence upon God. The loneliness of the urban contemplative takes on a character of the world in which the contemplative lives. It is a

[66] Merton, "Christian Solitude," 238.

Christianity authentically suited for the present, a present unfolding of the continual revelation of Christ to the world throughout history, which is the central purpose of the Church. The contemplative's presence among the marginalized is not a simple matter of location, but of total identification with the realities and struggles for liberation of the marginalized population. As I will discuss at length in the fourth chapter, Merton's view of the "modern contemplative" is one who is engaged in a struggle for justice because it is the authentic expression of divine love.

One might object that an urban solitude is oxymoronic, that such a concept of the contemplative life is inconceivable because it does away with the distinctive character of the contemplative life, which is, of course, solitude. Such an objection relies upon too simplistic a view of solitude.

Solitude in the Christian tradition, ubiquitously symbolized by a retreat into the desert, makes an unavoidable reference to the Exodus. The desert was the place of reckoning for God's people. It was where they faced their greatest tribulations, the greatest tests to their faith, and their greatest temptations. In addition to being a historical narrative of the Jewish people, the account of the Exodus in the desert is a treatise on spiritual dryness. Servais Pinckaers recounts that "in the solitude of Sinai, the hope of the Hebrew people was put to the test, to see if their hearts sought God and loved him before all else. The desert has thus become the privileged place of the human encounter with God, alone with the Alone in pure faith."[67] This is not an isolated narrative. The Gospel accounts of Jesus's retreat into the desert repeat the same theme. In the desert, Christ was tempted. Indeed, other accounts of Christ's retreats into solitude (notably his ascent to the Mount of Olives) emphasize some form of anguish. These narratives provide

[67] Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics,* trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 312-313.

important examples upon which the eremitic life is modeled. The desert, taken at its symbolic value, is exclusion, despair, sin. Solitude is purification through tribulation.

Importantly, the Exodus is a communal narrative, the story of a people, and accordingly, a socio-spiritual renewal must emerge from the center of forced alienation. Pinckaers continues that "the desert symbolizes the testing of faith, but also the forming of a new people."[68] For such a theme to recur in the modern world, desert solitude might well be found in social exclusion, an exclusion that is made intensely more poignant by the fact that it occurs in the midst of a social setting. This idea resonates with Merton, as he describes the slum not only as a willful exclusion from society of those who can't live affluently, but as an environment meant to separate one outcast from another.[69] The desert, conceived of as a communal space defined by a social anxiety or alienation, may well find its expression in the setting of urban exclusion. The forming of a new people would, then, imply a revitalization of this setting through the resolution of alienation. Indeed, the presence of the contemplative in this setting of urban exclusion might symbolize a kind of communitarian renewal of the excluded population. The contemplative has a special role in the urban desert, just as the Israelites had priests in the shadow of Sinai.

While Merton himself does not make the explicit reference, it seems that he views the contemplative tradition in the modern world as a kind of cure to Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." The contemplative in the world is the person who has grounded the finite self in an infinite interiority, and so resolved a number of alienations. As the carrier of a contemplative tradition into the modern epicenter of alienation, a monastic life might serve as the reminder of the source of value and its innate accessibility.

[68] Ibid.
[69] Merton, "Christian Solitude," 238.

These reflections allow for a change in the context of contemplation for the modern world, but they say nothing of the role of action. What is the active life in this context? Is it also shaped by the slum; does it find its fullest expression here? Does it experience a similar frameshift as does contemplation? Does action move from preaching to something else, from the ecclesiastical setting to the secular modern setting? What becomes of action, that fruit that overflows from contemplation, if contemplation is understood as self-discovery in light of God revealed in alienation? Merton's view of the particularities of modernity, those changes that have caused him to reconsider his role as a monk in society, will pave a way for a more unified understanding of action and contemplation that responds to the spiritual state of modernity, a state in which it may be all but impossible to identify with Merton's hope for spiritual renewal.

Chapter 3 | Religionless Modernity?

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Merton's central task later in his life was to adapt his contemplative vocation to the modern[70] world. The natural assumption behind this shift in thought is that there is some change that necessitates adaptation: there is some aspect of modernity that renders older views of monasticism unsuitable. Merton's treatment of the distinctiveness of the modern context is extensive, and it is complex. There is input from a variety of thinkers, among them Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Erich Fromm, Albert Camus, Gabriel Vahanian, and many others. The diversity signals an evaluation steeped in both secular and the spiritual analyses, and Merton seems to be most interested in the interplay between the two. The secular human spirit and modern religiosity share sources of atrophy and the resulting pathologies. Merton's analyses of the modern world follow two successive lines of thought: the first, regarding alienation of various forms, was addressed already in the previous chapter, but will be elaborated here. The second is most important, and it follows from alienation: the modern world is too disposed to idolatry, particularly self-idolatry. Its expressions in both religious identity and secular humanism are certainly distinct, but related, and they flow from the need to

[70] Throughout this chapter, I use the word "modern" in a colloquial rather than a philosophical sense, mirroring Merton's use of the word in most of his essays, which were non-academic. It is my preliminary (and certainly not systematically determined) impression that Merton's view of the "modern" mind of the Western person flirts with post-structural semantics. It would require a work much more extensive than this one to iron out the particularities of this view, so a footnote will hardly suffice. Adding difficulty to a precise determination is the fact that Merton was not a philosopher. What can be inferred about his philosophical views rely on extrapolations from his spiritual writings, comments on political events, and often inconclusive, informal references to philosophers interspersed throughout his writing. To complicate things further, it isn't even clear that Merton believed that there was such a thing as a "modern" person as distinguished from a person within any other era. His spiritual writings certainly take an unchanging spiritual "essence" of humanity as a working presupposition. He is, of course, Catholic, and any faithful Catholic anthropology would have difficulty rejecting this presupposition. His greatest spiritual influences span the eras. Many lie in antiquity, the fathers of desert monasticism especially. He is also greatly influenced by the medieval mystics John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Teresa of Avila. His comments on modern theological developments (the "Death of God" theology especially) include a certain respect, especially for Bonhoeffer, amidst many rejections of their ideologies. Nevertheless, he makes a point to emphasize that the core of the "developments" is really nothing new and are expressed throughout the history of Christian mysticism.

restore a sense of importance to a world of absurdity and boredom, conditions that have made simplicity, that state so necessary for spiritual vitality, totally unnatural.

These reflections will occur mainly through the lens of Merton's evaluation of those ideologies that most directly attempted to explore the modern world's capacity for religious experience: the versions of Radical Theology[71] that embraced the "Death of God" as the only way to restore authenticity to Christian faith, a kind of religionless (indeed anti-religious) Christianity meant to nod to a post-Christian world. Merton's interaction with this school of thought are collected in the book *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*[72] alongside much of his commentary on the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. His views of the religious capacity of modernity are indispensable for an understanding of his concept of the contemplative life, especially its potential for the spiritual renewal of modern religion.

A Purely Semantic Problem

Merton thinks that the idea that God is doomed in modernity because he has been hopelessly disfigured is as dangerous as it is exaggerated; he is not unsympathetic, however, to the critical elements that underlie the ideas. First, there are the obvious problems that would point to the failure of Christian spirituality in the modern world. For example, one of the most overtly Christian nations, the United States, needs to answer (in Merton's time) for segregation, the Vietnam war, and an unfathomable nuclear arsenal.[73] Regarding these (and a more

[71] Merton discusses as primary representatives of this thinking: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, J.A.T. Robinson, and Gabriel Vahanian (to whom Merton says he is most sympathetic).
[72] Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
[73] Merton has a lot to say about nationalism distorting true Christianity. It is another form of idolatry. While I will not discuss it at length here, it is another interesting dynamic to note in the context of this discussion of modernity.

generalized backdrop of class- and race-related violence that he explores in detail throughout his writings), Merton claims that "our gestures of repentance, though they might be individually sincere, are collectively hollow and meaningless. Why?"[74] He chalks it up to "a deep failure of communication."[75] The failure of communication is essentially an irrelevance of idolized God to the modern person. The "traditional and biblical language simply does not ring any bells in the minds of modern men,"[76] and so, in Merton's time, there was a turn to Radical Theology, Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity, and an embrace of the "Death of God."

But language does not cease to have meaning of its own accord; the ineffectiveness of biblical language would indicate a change in the collective consciousness[77] of the modern person. There is some frame of mind that can no longer readily grasp the way old mysteries are described. The "cultural vocabulary" of generally understood concepts and experiences doesn't include the infinitude of human experience and being. Transcendence is not universally understandable. There are a variety of possible reasons for this (scientism, materialism, or individualism, for example, are among them), but Camus's sense of the absurd likely plays an important role.[78] Religious language, which seeks to convey a transcendent grandeur in a supernatural world superimposed upon the profane, loses its claim to genuineness when the most emotionally and morally pressing situations of injustice are ignored on a massive scale and everything becomes tainted by a sense of triviality.

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[74] Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events" in *Faith and Violence,* 147.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 148.
[77] I use the tern in a sociological sense, as Durkheim characterized it: the totality of beliefs, values, and sentiments held and understood by the average member of a society.
[78] Merton doesn't make this claim explicitly in the essays in which he discusses this phenomenon, but it is certainly reflected in the theology of his day. A generation of faithful who witnessed two World Wars endured some massive redefinition of religious thought. Camus is a direct reaction to these experiences.

Perhaps chief among the contributors to the ineffectiveness of biblical language, however, is a kind of *boredom*. Alienation and the phenomenon of the "mass man," the person whose individuality has been reduced by overreliance on mass communication and whose needs have been manipulated to fit an interest in their repression,[79] have crushed the modern capacity for a traditional religiosity. There is a gulf between the modern promise of a technologized future in which humanity is self-sufficient and the experience of the dejected common person who has either been left out of the promise of prosperity or entirely deluded by the promise that might never materialize. Merton does not make the explicit connection when discussing the failures of ancient terminology in the modern world, but it seems that such a lack of meaning could be a result of the fact that such language describes a reality that doesn't seem to be real. It is exalted, mythical, intense: precisely those things lacking from the alienated world of a bored and confused "mass man." Here, it becomes particularly easy for the symbol to be sold as the fulness of reality, and so to become a sort of medicative idol. Merton makes clear that the Christian tradition of mysticism, that which perceives an unfathomability of God by the very fact of God's being beyond understanding, "coexists with a tradition of symbolic theology in which symbols and analogies of theological teaching [serve as]… true but imperfect approximations which lead us gradually toward that which cannot be properly expressed in human language."[80] If the symbol is taken to be fulness, however, it is easy for the symbol to be marketed as that which it is not: an answer to uncertainty and emptiness.

[79] Merton expressed sympathy for some of the ideas of Herbert Marcuse, who described in his book *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* the dynamics very briefly mentioned here. Merton's idea of the monk as a rejection of all that might make a person "one-dimensional" would indicate that his spirituality is very much suited for or aimed at escaping the traps of modern psycho-social phenomena.
[80] Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence,* 269.

Religion, it seems, to Merton (and those whose theology he discusses —Barth, Vahanian, J.A.T. Robinson, others), has not offered an alternative to this dispossession despite its best efforts; it has largely embraced the "simulacra,"[81] the idols of modernity. Or it has otherwise pitted itself so staunchly against modernity so as to idolize itself. In either case, it has opted for an illusory certainty that is unfaithful to any concept of God as mystery. This concept of God, the one who is seemingly absent and who is understood in absence, Merton claims is nothing new.[82] It seems what has changed is truly only the effectiveness of traditional language (and its associated rituals and symbols), not the capacity for humans to grasp God.

We must be clear that Merton largely rejects this "Death of God" theology. He finds it riddled with inconsistencies and essentially a rebranding of the problems of religion in secular terms. What he finds "most valid and cogent" in this theology is its critique of the pride and artificiality of modern organized religion.[83] Christianity seems to have become infected with worldliness but has maintained a monopoly on the loathing of "the world." What results is a profound confusion that amounts to an extreme form of idolatry and inauthenticity.

Idolatry

The problem of modernity and religion seems, to Merton, to be less of a problem of the secular person's inability to accept God than it is of the Christian's unwillingness to do so.[84]

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[81] Merton mentions this word in "Events and Pseuo-Events" as the word used in some parts of the Vulgate New Testament to refer to idols.

[82] Quite cleverly, and perhaps irritatingly for J.A.T. Robinson, Merton compares the Bishop's conclusions to those of St. Anselm of Canterbury, whose attempts to prove the existence of God *a priori* might represent the epitome of the ineffective semantics that Robinson discusses. See "Honest to God" in *Faith and Violence*, 229-230.

[83] Merton, "The Death of God and the End of History," in *Faith and Violence,* 245.

[84] Indeed, Merton is very wary of diagnosing the modern person as incapable of grasping God. He is highly critical of this claim embraced by adherents to the Radical Theology of his day. His central criticism of this view is that modern people may be incapable of embracing a reduced, symbolic god that never existed anyway (although the concept is certainly sold as such by popular religion), but they are certainly not incapable of loving an unknowable God who remains hidden but is nonetheless mysteriously understood. Merton himself was a prototypical modern

There are two manifestations of this phenomenon, two kinds of undetected idolatry. The first is common to secular and religious modernity alike: the myth of progress in the West has supplanted dependence upon God and made a god out of Western civilization. The second is particular to religious institutions, and is the basis of the failure of religious language to touch modern humanity: the churches, by overreliance on their symbolic otherworldliness (acts of piety, recourse to the supernatural as a substitute for attention to the world, other forms of insularity) have made an idol of themselves as distinct from, indeed *against,* the rest of the world.[85]

The myth of progress in the modern western world represents, for Merton, the most ubiquitous delusion facing western society. "Progress" is confused with power, and an utterly inauthentic understanding of and response to events leads to the illusion that dangerous misuse of that power is the only way to restore a sense of realness to modern existence, because it is the only way to materialize the myth. We are "the champion idolaters of all history," but our idols are not the "images of wood and stone" denounced by the prophets, but far more potent "images that live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us, and lead us off to kill… myths, distortions, half-truths, prejudices, invasions, illusions, lies… Ideals that claim to be humane and prove themselves in their effects to be callous, cruel."[86]

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man who had absolutely no interest in knowing or finding God before he was struck by a "frightening" reality that he could no longer ignore, a reality that could not be explained to him at all from the outside, and certainly not by analogy. (For more on this, see his essay, "The Contemplative and the Atheist," in *Contemplation in a World of Action.*)

[85] To return to Merton's distaste for Radical Theology, he claims the problem with excessive repudiation of God talk is that it swaps the second kind of idolatry for the first. By rejecting the symbolization of Christianity in favor of a total turn to and embrace of the technological modern person, modernity is instead idolized, and the myths of progress take the place of God as source of comfort and confidence, making the true God (who lives in mystery and absence, the one the Radical Theologians want to restore by erasing all talk of God altogether) entirely inaccessible. One delusion is substituted for another.

[86] Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events," 152-153.

These are the idols of Christians who "persist in invoking the God who is the guarantee of the security they seek, or seem to enjoy," but not the "God who speaks or makes demands." It is the god who is "simply the explanation of and purification for the comfort and confusion of affluent society."[87] Often, such idolatry involves the conflation (Merton says "syncretism") of faith and nationalism.[88] Among these, "there arises the notion of a 'Christian' obedience in which the faithful are urged to accept the national purpose on the justification of any and every means… All dissent in the civil sphere thereby automatically becomes a religious betrayal and a spiritual apostasy."[89] The idolization of the nation does not occur in a vacuum, but is a result of a broader idolization of the liberal ideals of the Western world, those often invoked for the sake of domination under the guise of liberation. This comforting concept of God "has tended more and more to identify the God of the Bible and of the Church with the Angel of the West. The hidden God… has been claimed as visible and present in the spirit, the ethos, the inner drive, and the whole cultural outlook of the Western world."[90] Clearly, this idolatry is not confined to the practice of religion. It has always been associated with Christianity because until the modern era, the narrative of western society was undeniably (nominally) Christian, but if the ideals of western exceptionalism put in practice result in totally unchristian atrocities, the problem of idolatry is certainly a more all-encompassing one. It is fundamentally an issue of pride: "We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive, and the most humane… we worship ourselves in this image."[91]

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[87] Merton, "The Unbelief of Believers" in *Faith and Violence,* 201.
[88] Ibid., 202-203.
[89] Ibid., 203.
[90] Merton, "Violence and the Death of God," in *Faith and Violence,*193.
[91] Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events," 154.

Ultimately, the tendency toward idolatry is an expression of the insecurities of the modern era: boredom, absurdity, alienation, guilt. This last one is particularly important. Merton claims we know we are idolaters, and we know we are under judgement. So, in order to clear our conscience, we must continuously prove to ourselves that our idols are real, that our myths and delusions are not unstable or imagined. We must reaffirm the clarity of our mental image of grandeur and exceptionalism when it becomes clouded by an inevitable sense of falsity because it is, ultimately, a sham.[92] To do this, we either appropriate God and his associated righteousness, or we manufacture some political crisis from which we can emerge triumphant (Merton provides the example of the Berlin Crisis). And the modern context elaborated by the existentialists has some explanatory power: "It is a cycle that is all the more easily set in motion when existence is in fact more really drab, when the mentality of the participants is more genuinely desperate, when the inner contradictions they seek to escape are all the more inexorable."[93]

Christianity has embraced worldliness by rejecting the world. More precisely, it has rejected the ailing world while embracing the powerful one. This ailing world, according to the atheist philosophers and Radical Theologians, the churches have exploited with false promises, manufacturing a lie of unhappiness in order to keep people reliant on a mythical narrative of salvation in a mythologized god. The profound alienation of the modern era is rebranded as a simple lack of adoption of symbolic religion, and so to adopt unreservedly the idols of institutional religion, the simplified symbols meant to filter an infinite subjective interiority into a limited and objective orthodoxy, is to cure alienation.

Merton disagrees with these accusations of intentional manipulation, claiming that if such alienation wasn't in some sense real, there would not be such violence and secular idolatry as we

[92] Ibid., 156-158.
[93] Ibid., 158.

have described.[94] What he argues, however, is that the churches have totally bought into the Western myth of progress, and in doing so have adopted the same distortions used to uphold what is really a secular narrative of affluence, and in doing so have totally overlooked the depth of the modern problem.[95]

> Popular religion has to a great extent betrayed man's inner spirit and turned him over, like Samson, with his hair cut off and his eyes dug out, to turn the mill of a self-frustrating and self-destroying culture…The sin of religiosity is that it has turned God, peace, happiness, salvation, and all that man desires into products to be marketed in a speciously attractive package deal.[96]

Even the fundamentalists and integralists, those who ardently reject modernity's materialism and godlessness, have wholeheartedly adopted the same narrative of exceptionalism, and thus fallen into the very same nationalist trap as the rest of the world that they seem to oppose.[97] If Christianity is the hallmark of the West, then for these integralists, the exaltation of Christianity means the exaltation of the West, and this is the very same problem that the rest of the world seems to have. As such, Merton claims that "the great heretics of today are perhaps to be sought, as Karl Rahner has suggested, among those who are technically orthodox and at the same time profoundly insensitive to the inner meaning and spiritual implications of Christian revelation."[98]

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[94] Merton, "Godless Christianity?" 264-265

[95] These criticisms may seem overly harsh, but we must remember that they were made by a person who witnessed scores and scores of Christians passively acquiesce to, and indeed *participate in,* the Holocaust and the associated horrors of the Second World War. Are they too harsh for the world of today? I tend to think that perhaps they were not harsh enough, because it seems that despite the leveling of the criticism, Christians have not yet ceased to participate in oppression, and they have not ceased to justify it with idolatrous patriotism. The post-Christian era is not over, and Merton's reflections are as salient today as they were when he wrote them.

[96] Merton, "A Note on *The Psychological Causes of War* by Eric Fromm" in *Faith and Violence,* 116-117. Further, Merton claims that for such a sale to be made is insulting to the mature person in the modern world: "The truly modern adult person will not allow himself to be treated as an alienated and helpless individual whose inner experience is dictated to him by another and imposed upon him from the outside. It is the surest sign of immaturity, to be imposed on entirely by the ideas and ideals of others and to substitute these for one's own true personal experience and judgement of life. The faith of the Christian is an utter adherence to truth which is not imposed from the outside." ("The Contemplative and the Atheist," in *Contemplation in a World of Action,* 177.

[97] Merton, "The Unbelief of Believers," 202.

[98] Merton, "Honest to God," 231.

What distinguishes modernity from antiquity in its religious context and capacity, then, might truly be only semantic, but the implications of this semantic difference are massive for the modern conscience. Having witnessed a monumental failure of symbols, we recognize the emptiness of words, slogans, categories—they are idols. What is authentic and real is not contained by these reductions or categorizations of experience, and to act according to analogy as if analogy were sufficient is to live according to *simulacra,* idolatrously. The task of the modern Christian is to restore authenticity.

Immersion in Love

We have already seen one solution that Merton gives: the contemplative's turn to simplicity, the finding of value in being. The second solution Merton gives is predictable and extraordinarily simple. It is to be immersed in love, particularly love of our neighbor. This is truly the same as the first, only manifested differently. Unfortunately, because "love" has always been such a central concept in Christian discourse, it has also suffered from the same mythologization as the rest of the Christian vocabulary. Fortunately, however, it's a concept central enough to the human experience that it can't truly become meaningless. If "God is love," then, neither can God. "The God who is love is known to no one except to him who loves."[99] But what is needed is a de-mythologization of love. Merton doesn't explore this point as directly as he does, say, interiority,[100] but he does nonetheless provide some indications as to what this

[99] Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative and the Atheist," in *Contemplation in a world of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1971), 178.
[100] Even a person who "follows a moral code of brotherhood and benevolence" does not fully reach Merton's concept of the Christian. "Christians themselves too often fail to realize that the infinite God is dwelling within them, so that He is in them and they are in Him… Tue Christian wisdom is therefore oriented toward the experience of the divine Light that is present in the world, the Light in whom all things are, and which is nevertheless unknown to the world because no mind can see or grasp its infinity." ("The Contemplative Life in the Modern World," in *Faith and Violence,* 222)

might entail. He turns again to Bonhoeffer: "I think Bonhoeffer was absolutely right when he said our real task is to bear in ourselves the fury of the world against Christ in order to reconcile the world with Christ."[101] It also requires, as will be elaborated in the next chapter, a sort of protest:

> The unconditional character of the Christian concern… demands that at some point one confront 'the world' with a refusal. We know, in fact, that Bonhoeffer did just this…. It was Bonhoeffer the 'religionless,' Bonhoeffer who sought 'God in the world,' who died protesting against Nazi worldliness when the vast majority of the religious, the orthodox, the officially other-worldly and impeccably Christian, lined up behind Hitler's armies…[102]

To return to the terminology of "action and contemplation," it seems Merton understands that the modern world *has* called for a renewed understanding of the two, although perhaps not necessarily. Can monasticism, or the contemplative life more broadly, exist in the way it has for centuries? Maybe in form, but not in attitude. The modern attitude towards religiosity cannot be scorned in the monastery, and in a certain sense, it is to be embraced as inescapable. The contemporary contemplative exists, after all, in the modern world—not in any other—and their primary service as a part of the Church is to be oriented toward the modern world, not to any other. (As it happens, the "modern" understanding of the real God, the de-mythologized concept, according to Merton, is *not* new. The ancient and medieval mystics, many of whom were cloistered contemplatives, are precisely those who champion a de-mythologized "modern" understanding of God.) But because the modern world less readily accepts or identifies with symbolic language about God, any kind of symbolic life within a contemplative Order will be lost to the modern world and of no service. Acts of piety and asceticism might be vital for the

[101] Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events," 163.
[102] Merton, "Honest to God," 238.

individual contemplative, but they are no longer sufficient as "proof" of the contemplative's dedication to the world, or of God's realness to the contemplative.

Is proof of dedication necessary? No; a contemplative might still be loving God near-perfectly if the world outside the cloister has no way of knowing it. But ultimately, if a contemplative's immersion in the love of God is a way of making God manifest to the world,[103] the manifestation of that love will occur in terms acceptable to the world. If, truly, the modern world no longer accepts analogies about God as indicative of truth, if these analogies can't help but to serve as empty symbols to a post-Christian world, then the contemplative must make love manifest in some other way in order to be authentically responsive to the world in which they exist.

A symbolic, idolatrous Christianity of the modern era may have become so associated with falsity and oppression[104] that nothing can restore to it its proper face of love except an active resistance to oppression. Perhaps the only communication of Christian love acceptable to the modern world is one unwaveringly oriented to the "least of our neighbors." If the Death-of-God theologians are onto something, then maybe the modern context, by refusing to accept any concept of God but a totally de-mythologized one, has finally provided us an opportunity to realize Christian love as it was always meant to be realized.

[103] God's love is creative and revelatory, so it is not contained within a person's soul. A person, as unity of spirit and matter, can't help but to express materially the presence of a spiritual love. Love is experienced by an indissoluble person, not by a disembodied soul. Therefore, it necessarily interacts with the world. The next chapter will detail how the religious experience as understood through the Hebrew Prophets is primarily a communication of love for humanity.

[104] One can debate which acts count as oppressive, but Christians overwhelmingly accepting service to Hitler seems like a fairly non-negotiable grounding for this interpretation.

Chapter 4 | Contemplation in Action: Accounts of Christian Resistance

Merton's concept of the contemplative life seems to tend always towards a more complete grounding in the world. The contemplative is separate from the world, somehow having left it, but this distance is artificial to Merton; it is also improper. Merton's political engagements, his continuous advocacy and social action, all paint the picture of a monk who, despite finding freedom in the monastery, could not help but consider it also a kind of confinement. Merton's actions point to a theological orientation that he never laid out in an organized manner. There are others, however, who might provide a more systematic view of how the contemplative life finds its fulness "in the world."

Merton corresponded at length with the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose engagements in the Civil Rights Movement and resistance to the Vietnam War mirrored much of Merton's own political/social involvement. Heschel's theology, particularly his interpretive work on the Hebrew prophets, reveals many of the biblical dynamics that may have influenced Merton's thinking about his vocation, and more broadly the role and concept of the Christian as one who responds to a revelation of God in the world. Heschel elaborates an account of the prophetic experience that aligns with Merton's idea of the role of the modern contemplative.

Ignacio Ellacuría, a Spanish-Salvadoran Jesuit priest and liberation theologian who was martyred for his revolutionary social engagement on behalf of El Salvador's lower classes, provides a framework for thinking about the role of justice (especially action for justice) in the Christian understanding in a way that is quite suited to Merton's thinking. Ellacuría's influence largely occurred after Merton's death. The two never knew each other. There are also several characteristics of Ellacuría's theology that are carried forward from previous work in liberation

theology with which Merton expressed disagreement, and several differences in perspective between the two thinkers. It is these nuances, when considered in light of the two priests' similarities in thought, that help to paint a more precise picture of Merton's concept of contemplation in the modern world.

Borrowing concepts of social ethics and God's manifestation in history from Heschel and Ellacuría, we might approximate a kind of historical-moral narrative of religion to which Merton's contemplative might respond and in which they might situate themselves. Merton, as a solitary, elaborates a spirituality for the individual who responds to God in the world, an identity for one who understands God as just and liberative, invisible but made manifest in love.

Expressions of Faith and Religious Experience in the Context of Prophecy

To understand a person's response to God one must understand their experience of and relation to God. The content of religious experience is the primary basis for faith. The concept of faith might be defined as a transformative acknowledgement of God, a belief that has some ontological significance because it comprehends that there exists a relationship between the divine and the mundane.

In Abraham Heschel's analysis of the prophets, faith as defined above is a communal response to a God whose presence is emphasized by prophets as a "staggering" and "personal" presence.[105] The prophet calls Israel back to faithfulness because the prophet communicates God as a concrete reality deeply invested in the affairs of His people. Such knowledge is meant to shatter any idols that reduce God to a source of comfort or power. Importantly, the transformative effect of faith is in social ethics, and a correction of injustice is the response to

[105] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets,* Perennial Classics ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 353.

God that the prophets demand. In a key parallel to Merton's writings, Heschel argues that the iconoclastic exhortations of the prophets were chiefly directed at empty ritual and the symbolization of worship as in any way separate from love of neighbor: "Amos and the prophets that followed him… proclaimed that the worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral living, and that when immorality prevails, worship is detestable… deeds of injustice vitiate both sacrifice and prayer."[106] There can be no concept of piety that is independent of justice. The element of transformation in the belief that constitutes an act of faith is the turn toward the neighbor as an object of God's love and an infinitely meaningful reality. One is obliged to recognize and respond to this reality in order to properly express love for God in worship.

In a Christian context, Ellacuría's account of faith is something very similar to Heschel's: an authentic love of God manifested as a simultaneous love of neighbor that does not tolerate any oppression of the neighbor. For Ellacuría, nowhere is this clearer than in the incarnation of Jesus and in his works. In the New Testament, to hear God's word through Jesus and to have faith in the One who sent him is to pass from death to eternal life.[107] Those who have passed from death into eternal life know they have done so because they love one another. To fail to love is to remain in death.[108] True faith, then, amounts to love not only for God as a transcendent, invisible abstraction, but also for the mundane, visible neighbor.

The necessity of loving our neighbor in an authentic expression of faith follows from the fact that *God in his totality is utterly unknowable.* This reality is central in the thought of both Heschel and Merton, and implicit in Ellacuría's focus on history as the scene of revelation. To

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[106] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 250.
[107] Jn 5:24
[108] 1 Jn 3:13-14. Ellacuría cites these verses and draws the connection between them. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, *Fe y Justicia* (Bilbao, Spain: Desclee de Brouwer, 1999), 181.

love God as if such a concept were possible in isolation from a love of neighbor is to construct an illusory or inauthentic concept of God, to create an idol. The iconoclasm to which Merton is so sympathetic is simply a total concretization of love, a removal of abstraction that serves as a dangerous opportunity for idolatry. To respond to God as transcendentally immanent in all creation, most particularly in the human being, and to love the human being unabashedly and concretely, is to love purely and authentically.

Fundamental to Merton's emphasis on contemplation and Heschel's reading of the prophets are the centrality of mystery, identification, and personhood. The prophet and the contemplative are engrossed in the invisibility of God, in the total impossibility of understanding God entirely. Nevertheless, both Heschel's understanding of prophetic experience and Merton's understanding of contemplative experience rely upon a kind of "personal" experience of God in which God is understood not as a thing or a concept but as a shockingly present person. The concept of God as a "person" has two essential components: God is experienced in relationship, and God is experienced as one who has "concern for the nonself," and thus "has concern for nondivine being."[109] For Merton, "contemplative wisdom is… a living contact… not only of 'I and Thou,' but a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become, according to the expression of St. Paul, 'one spirit.'"[110] Taken together, Heschel's attributes of personhood describe very much the same experience. While immersed in God's presence, a human has total concern for the present nonself (God), while God has total concern for the human. The relational experience is one of complete and mutual self-abandonment in the other—of total

[109] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 622.
[110] Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World," in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 222.

identification—an experience of "one spirit." God's investment in humanity, simultaneously humanity's experience of God, is adopted by the human as the core of religious experience.

The prophet and the contemplative are thus seen to have a parallel role; the contemplative in the modern world may emulate the task of the Hebrew Prophet in making known to the world God's concern for the world. Heschel distinguishes between the prophet and the mystic by noting that "the mystic experience is man's turning toward God; the prophetic act is God's turning toward man. The former is first of all an event in the life of man, contingent on the aspiration and initiative of man; the latter is first of all an event in the life of God, contingent on the pathos and initiative of God."[111] But the prophetic experience is a religious experience, and the mutuality of the religious phenomenon renders this distinction between prophet and mystic rather meaningless. The religious encounter is at once a mystic and a prophetic encounter. "Man's awareness of God is to be understood as God's awareness of man… every apprehension of God is an act of being apprehended by God."[112] Reflection on the phenomenon of prophecy reveals that revelation is not God divulging his nature to humanity, it is God communicating that he is infinitely concerned with what happens to humanity and in human society.

Justice and Resistance in a "Theology of Love"

Ignacio Ellacuría reached conclusions that coincided with many of Merton's analyses of the pathologies of Western Christian spirituality in his time, and which have important implications for the contemplative life in the modern world, many of which also echo Merton's later treatment of his monastic vocation. This critique of modern religiosity serves as the point

[111] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1976), 198.
[112] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 624.

from which both thinkers develop their accounts of Christian action and its underlying spiritual force.

To Ellacuría, justice, far more complex than the simple requirement of "giving to each their due," is rather better defined as "the historical form of objectivized love, of love realized in a historical situation."[113] Justice is love manifested outwardly to correct injustice, to undo whatever spiritual shortfall allowed for a person to be oppressed in the first place. Importantly, Ellacuría, Heschel, and Merton all seem to identify in their concept of justice a primary attention to injustice. Heschel, for example, states frankly that "justice may properly be described as 'the active process of remedying or preventing what should arouse the sense of injustice.'" The "presence of oppression and corruption" was "uppermost in the prophets' mind," not an attempt to define or exalt an abstract virtue of "justice."[114] This definition of justice as awareness of its absence is a tricky one because it seems to use the term "justice" in its definition; but it is perhaps the most useful characterization. Heschel claims that the justice of God is a thing known *a priori* in religious experience. The Judeo-Christian tradition professes the justice of God as another self-evident attribute of God akin to infinitude, omniscience, or power.[115] As such, a person of faith has no need for a positive definition of justice, since an understanding of God includes an immediate understanding of justice.[116] Merton doesn't provide such a direct definition of justice, but his belief that an intentional iconoclasm could restore a justice-seeking concept of religion or correct the quietism (and indeed cooperation with evil) of modern

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[113] Ignacio Ellacuría, "Fe y Justicia," in *Escritos Teologicos* III, ed. Aída Estela Sánchez (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2001), 316. Cited in Michael Lee, "Transforming Realities: Christian Discipleship in the Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2005), 242.
[114] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 260.
[115] Ibid., 254-255.
[116] This account is essentially describing the existence of conscience. One who knows God knows justice from the very fact of knowing God. Just as it is often easier to identify a lie than it is to be certain of the truth, an injustice is perhaps more readily understood than justice, simply because it is a rupture from the spiritual orientation of the person familiar with God.

Christianity would certainly point to his perception that a sense of justice is one of the first aspects of authentic religious experience that is lost upon the invention of idols.[117]

It is also important to note both Heschel's and Ellacuría's attention to history as the stage of God's self-revelation, the collaborative construction of God and humanity's participation in God. It inevitably implies a more collectivist concept of religion, and therefore of history. Heschel notes that the distinctive theological contribution of the Hebrew Prophets is not the elevation of monotheistic religion from ritualism to ethics; such a tradition was clearly evident in Moses and those who preceded him. "The chief characteristic of prophetic thought is the primacy of God's involvement in history… They are moved by a responsibility for society, by a sensitivity to what the moment demands."[118] Salvation history, in this view, is the collective story of a people's interaction with God, and the reflections of the people's attitude occurs in the society's structure. It is indeed a view more derivative of the Israelite narrative, in which God revealed himself to a people rather than to individual persons, and those individuals to whom God gave special understanding (the prophets) were considered to be part of the people's narrative. Spirituality was a social experience more than an individual one. While a person could be individually responsible for sin, it was Israel as a whole that reflected fidelity or infidelity to God. Heschel notes the important role of the prophet in revealing that in situations of injustice, while "few are guilty, all are responsible. If we admit that in some measure an individual is conditioned or affected by the spirit of a society, an individual's crime discloses society's corruption."[119] The prophet's plea was for the repentance of a people.

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[117] For this reason, it is important for the logical consistency of Merton's understanding of religion that he not agree with the Radical Theologians' claim that the modern person has lost all religious capacity. If this were the case, an experience of God *a priori* is out of the question.
[118] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 279.
[119] Ibid., 19.

Ellacuría maintains this collectivist characterization in his analysis of Christian spirituality.[120] It is perhaps because of this focus on society as a whole that Ellacuría and his liberationist contemporaries were sympathetic to Marxist social analysis and ultimately accepting of revolution as a means of social change meant to reflect the expression of justice in the story of a people.[121] Jon Sobrino, another Jesuit and Ellacuría's intellectual collaborator, wrote that Ellacuría "consider[ed] the bad aspects of reality as *sins*—meaning he considered them as final—and not just as limitations, partial failures, [or] necessary evils for a better future."[122] An unjust society was not a result of social weakness that could be passed off as inevitable. It was a conscious rejection of love in a collective sense, a disclosure of society's corruption, as Heschel put it. The social sin was not identified with any particular individual, it was structural: "[Ellacuría's] prophetic accusation was principally leveled against objective and structural realities" that needed to be changed in order for the social sin to be overcome.[123]

Merton, in various writings, expresses skepticism towards an overreliance on structural characteristics that verged on a Marxist historical materialism.[124] Merton's focus was on a more individualized approach to justice-seeking and moral responsibility, one based on "revolt" or "resistance" rather than "revolution."[125] Nevertheless, Ellacuría provides an elaborated

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[120] The challenges to liberation theologies that came from the emerging postmodern Radical Orthodoxy movement in Christian theology in the 1990s focused primarily on the inadequacies of structuralist thought that formed the basis of the Marxist social analyses used in liberationist thought.

[121] The morally acceptable or practically expedient nature of this revolutionary attitude (violent, peaceful, secular, religious, etc.) varies widely according to different liberation theologians. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this work to analyze the particularities of Ellacuría's views on this matter.

[122] Jon Sobrino, "Ignacio Ellacuria, el hombre y el Cristiano," in *Fe y Justicia,* 51.

[123] Ibid.

[124] In some iterations of Latin American Liberation Theology, including probably Ellacuría's, a kind of "historical materialism" was a theological impossibility. When God becomes viewed as present and invested in history, and when humans and human activities are understood as saturated with divine significance, one cannot talk of history as purely material. To talk of history is to understand that it is the stage upon which God's love is revealed.

[125] See, for example, Merton's essay "The Death of God and the End of History," in *Faith and Violence.* It has been said that dissertations could be written about Merton's idea of the self, so this is clearly another question that, while relevant to this investigation, is unfortunately far too complex to deal with precisely here. It is nonetheless important to note that this point differs significantly from Ellacuría's thinking, and the similarities between their thought

theological framework that describes the thinking that underlies Merton's affinity for a "theology of resistance" as an essential part of a "theology of love."[126]

A major problem with contemporary spirituality, in the view of Ellacuría and Merton especially, is the inability, or truly the unwillingness, to lend one's attention to injustice, to consider injustice an unrelenting claim on the conscience of a Christian. Ellacuría believed that this arose largely from a false separation of faith and justice as two distinct concepts capable of functioning without reliance on each other. In this false separation, faith is considered a loving acceptance of God as something that can be understood and loved independently from humanity. He argued that "psychologically and socially, recourse to faith as a disjunctive option in relation to justice is an ideologized cop-out meant to maintain an existing situation and maintain oneself within that situation."[127] The interpretation frames justice as some purely natural human activity with no supernatural origin, orientation, or destination. Faith, in this view, is transcendental; justice is mundane. He identifies that the "disjunctive contraposition of faith and justice – that which is faith is not formally justice, and that which is justice is not formally faith – considers that faith is primary, and one subsequently searches for how to integrate it with justice."[128] This sequential spiritual dynamic is not coherent, Ellacuría claims, once we have defined justice as a concrete form of love. With justice defined as an expression of love, Ellacuría cites the Christian

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should not be taken to extend beyond their treatment of justice as love and the implications that has for the conceptual integration of faith, action, and contemplation.

An unfinished series of essays that Merton was writing at the end of his life on Camus's literary works includes deep sympathy for Camus's concept of the Rebel as a fairly adequate picture of the Christian response to the Gospels. For more on these essays, see David Joseph Belcastro, "Merton and Camus on Christian Dialogue in a Postmodern World," *The Merton Annual* 10 (1997).

[126] Merton, "Toward a Theology of Resistance" in *Faith and Violence,* 8-9.

[127] Ellacuría, *Fe y Justicia,* 125. Translation mine.

[128] Ibid., 131.

priority of love among the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love)[129] to show that a faith without justice is a distortion of a Christian spirituality. Truly, the framing of faith as a priority before justice is impossible when justice is considered a form of love.[130] Anticipating the objection that faith is a form of love of God while justice is a form of love of humans, and that priority is to be given to love of God, Ellacuría argues that love of God and love of people cannot be separated.[131] One necessarily implies the other.[132] Here, the parallels with Merton are abundantly clear:

> "Love" is unfortunately a much-misused word. It trips easily off the Christian tongue – so easily that one gets the impression it means others ought to love us for standing on their necks…
> A theology of love cannot be allowed merely to serve the interests of the rich and powerful… while exhorting the poor and underprivileged to practice patience, meekness, longsuffering… A theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them… Theology does not exist merely to appease the already too-untroubled conscience of the powerful and the established. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution. In any case, it is a theology of *resistance,* a refusal of the evil that reduces a brother to homicidal desperation.[133]

Love and resistance to evil, practiced in the social sphere, imply one another. To love is to recognize a neighbor's oppression and refuse to allow it to continue. Resistance, the practice of justice, is not a worldly mission separate from the greater supernatural reality of God. Justice is an expression of love, and if God is love, faith and justice are united.

To argue for the submissiveness and long-suffering of an oppressed people with reference to Jesus's patient endurance of the violence committed against him is either to mask a partiality

[129] In 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul writes "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (NRSV) "Love" is also often translated as "charity," a deep and complete form of all-encompassing love.
[130] Ellacuría, *Fe y Justicia*, 131. Translation mine.
[131] Ibid.
[132] This understanding is longstanding in the Christian tradition. See, for example, Aquinas's ST II.II.25.1
[133] Merton, "Toward a Theology of Resistance," 8-9.

towards the powerful or to artificially separate faith from justice in such a way that faith becomes utterly loveless. It is deeply concerning to Merton that the "negative, lachrymose, and 'resigned' Christianity of those who manage to blend the cult of the status quo with a habit of verbalizing on suffering and submission" seems to imply that piety can in any way exist without resistance to injustice:

> For such as these, indifference to real evil has become a virtue, and preoccupation with petty or imaginary problems of piety substitutes for the creative unrest of the truly spiritual man.[134] A few phrases about the Cross and a few formal practices of piety concord, in such a religion, with a profound apathy, a bloodless lassitude, and perhaps an almost total incapacity to love.[135]

Here, again, it is helpful to recall the power of compassion to incite action. One might imitate Christ's patient, passive suffering oneself, but to forego action on behalf of one's oppressed neighbor by encouraging their own submission is to refuse to allow compassion its creative power. The German theologian Johannes Baptist Metz expressed this dynamic quite clearly: "Every rebellion against suffering is fed by the subversive power of remembered suffering. In this sense, suffering is in no way a purely passive, inactive 'virtue.'"[136]

This misplaced idea of the unique access to the "supernatural" afforded to one in prayers and pious acts is the root of the perception that these acts in some sense supplant the need for social action in the Christian conscience. "This is because we apparently can't conceive material or worldly things seriously as having any capacity to be 'spiritual.' But Christian social action,

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[134] Ellacuría shares Merton's concept of what it means to be "truly spiritual": "Those who are spiritual are not the ones who perform many 'spiritual' practices, but those who, filled with the Spirit, reach its creative and renovating impetus, its overcoming of sin and death, its power of resurrection and greater life; those who reach for the fullness and freedom of God's children; those who inspire and illumine others and help them live more simply and freely." Ellacuría , "Espiritualidad" in *Escritos Teológicos*, IV, ed. Aída Estela Sánchez (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2001), 51. Cited in Michael Lee, "Transforming Realities…," 38.

[135] Merton, "The Prison Meditations of Father Delp." In *Faith and Violence,* 55.

[136] Johannes B. Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering." In *New Questions on God,* New Concilium Series, ed. Johannes B. Metz (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 15.

on the contrary, conceives of man's work itself as a *spiritual* reality."[137] This social action, much as Ellacuría saw it, is really "part of the redemptive work of Christ, liberating man from misery, squalor, subhuman living conditions, economic or political slavery, ignorance, alienation."[138]

Despite the importance of identifying worldly justice with a supernatural reality, it is important to note that a complete understanding of justice as love cannot, for Ellacuría or Merton, exist without necessary reference to the spiritual reality of God. Contemporary spirituality "must overcome a dualism that completely separates the spiritual from the material, and it must resist a 'monism' that conflates one into the other. To carry out this task, Ellacuría recasts the spiritual and material as two mutually-dependent dimensions of a unity."[139] The discovery of God as a reality beyond the material world is an essential component of the proper framing of the unity of faith and justice.

Elaboration on the Unity of Faith and Justice

The Judeo-Christian understanding of the love of God includes a primary attention to mercy and justice as the key characteristics of this love.[140] A person whose life responds to this God primarily seeks to make this same love manifest by reflecting its central characteristics. The tensions between different Christian lifestyles might reflect disagreements over the proper scope

[137] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 2014), 76. Emphasis Merton's.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Lee, "Transforming Realities…," 237-238
[140] Heschel notes that early rabbinic interpretations of the first two chapters of Genesis reveal these two qualities as the "main attributes of God's relation to the world." The attribute of justice is associated with the name *Elohim,* the name used throughout the first chapter of Genesis, whereas the Tetragrammaton, the supreme and ineffable name of God, is used starting in chapter 2 to refer to a merciful God. The distinction would seem to signify a primacy of mercy over justice in God's dealings with the world. For more on this distinction, see the note on p. 281 of *The Prophets.* More recent biblical scholarship uses the different names as one of the many characteristics according to which the Torah can be recognized as having been compiled from different sources (where one author used *Elohim* while another used the Tetragrammaton).

of these characteristics. Mercy emphasized at the expense of justice results in quietism; justice at the expense of mercy may lead to violence.

I cannot hope to give any adequate account of the fulness of mercy and justice, or the distinctions between their human and divine manifestations. In some sense, the entire Christian life might be understood as a discovery of precisely what it is that these qualities entail and demand. Therefore, I can only provide a supremely inadequate sketch that might be useful as a sort of working definition of these terms: Mercy might be understood as having two interrelated attributes, compassion and forgiveness. Forgiving mercy allows for reconciliation after a wrong is committed. Compassionate mercy moves one to end the suffering of another. Because compassion is the acknowledgement of and participation in some shared experience, it is a unifying force aimed, in some sense, towards equality. It is, to echo Bernard of Clairvaux, the treatment of my neighbor's sufferings as my sufferings, of their joys as my joys. If I might be inclined to end my own suffering, I am required by compassion to do the same for my neighbor. Framed as such, there seems to be a continuity between mercy and justice, as both are understood through compassion. Indeed, even forgiving mercy flows from compassionate understanding. To forgive is to ease the suffering of disunity between the wronged and the wrongdoer.[141]

[141] This mutuality between mercy and justice is even quite clear in relation to sin and forgiveness, particularly in the way humans are to deal with sin on a social level. Extremely prominent throughout the Prophetic and Wisdom books is the idea that there is no person who has not sinned, nobody who is exempt from divine judgement. All people, having been shown mercy by God, owe mercy to one another in order to act justly. For a human to deny mercy to another is to deny to their neighbor the same gratuitous love that God has already shown to them. It is to apply to the neighbor a different standard, a different "deservingness of forgiveness," than that applied to the self. In this sense, even a simplistic concept of justice as fairness, one that might be said to exist independently of compassion or mercy in a strictly human sense (even retributive justice could, in certain situations, satisfy conditions of fairness), cannot be conceived of without mercy in light of a concept of a merciful God. To act mercifully (in the sense of mercy as forgiveness) is to be fair.

Justice is a less clear concept, and any precise definition will have some shortcoming. Fundamentally, however, to frame justice in terms of compassion as we have done with mercy will provide an adequate working idea of what is meant by a Judeo-Christian understanding of "justice." The Prophetic texts have a lot to offer to this understanding. The focus of just action is frequently identified as the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, the alien (Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 22:3; In the Wisdom books, see Ecclesiates 5:8, for some examples) So identified with the oppressed or the unfortunate, it seems that biblical justice is a virtue that seeks to lift up the downtrodden. To do justice is to identify in one's most afflicted neighbors the right to share in one's own fortune. It requires, then, also to share in our neighbor's misfortune. It is, in this sense, quite close to our concept of mercy.

Mercy and justice, thus expressed as surging from compassion and oriented primarily towards the oppressed, can be understood as a unity whose fulness exists only in the simultaneous expression of both qualities. Mercy demands justice as justice demands mercy. Mercy and justice are inseparable, two unified aspects of a human's participation in knowledge of the divine. If a human can know God, it is some simultaneous and intertwined expression of mercy and justice in a single experience of love that this knowledge both entails and requires. The prophets' overwhelming focus on both mercy and justice in their attempt to make God present to Israel would indicate that such a unified understanding of the two is inherent in this presence.

Beyond being a pleasant Johannine platitude, the statement that "God is love"[142] is quite consequential for this reflection. It means that the knowledge of God, much of which is understood as faith, is necessarily an understanding of this unity of mercy and justice (an

[142] 1 Jn 4:9

understanding of love). As characterizations of God's love, they are indeed also important elements of God's self-revelation.[143] The love cannot be separated from the person, with God understood as a person. The person *is* love, *is* compassionate mercy and justice. The human's participation in these things is the mode of knowing and continuously revealing God. If the life of faith is a life of knowledge of, response to, and participation in[144] this God being, it is also, then, a knowledge of, response to, and participation in compassionate mercy and justice (understood as an inseparable unity) in the world. Love is the human's immersion in God. Love divinizes the human and humanizes the Divine.

Because justice and mercy are necessarily relational (they are expressed outwards by an agent to a recipient), a human's "response to" or "participation in" the revealed love of God is a social reality. Faith implies action, directed outwards towards another person, founded on justice and mercy. It is in this sense that we can begin to understand that "those who say, 'I love God'

[143]Justice, especially in the Old Testament, is considered by some (most prominently those who developed Latin American liberation theologies) to be the constitutive act of God's self-revelation in history. Adherents to this view draw heavily from the prophetic tradition and from the account of the Exodus, a historical-political act of God that demonstrated his salvation for his people, and one that would foreshadow the universal salvific sacrifice of Jesus. This view tends to reject the understanding of the Jesus's passion as the total spiritualization of the Exodus narrative. It is insufficient to view Christ's sacrifice as having purely spiritual significance, of serving as expiation for the sins of humanity without a simultaneous and at least equally important liberative purpose directed towards the end of human social oppression (as opposed to solely ending the oppression of sin). The crucifixion, in some of these liberationist narratives, was another act of God's self-revelation in history, the height and culmination of prophecy, the total uncovering of injustice, and the ultimate exhortation to accomplish what God's people had repeatedly failed to do: to establish a world of justice, and in doing so, to realize and bring forth the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Importantly, Jeremiah identified this ultimate act of God's self-revelation as an act of forgiving mercy. In his foretelling of the coming of a new covenant (Chapter 31; This covenant is interpreted by Christians as having arrived in fulness through Jesus), Jeremiah announces that it is by God's forgiving their wickedness and forgetting their sins that all people would know the Lord. It is based on this understanding that the cross is generally interpreted to have been the accomplishment of this forgiveness. Any reference to justice is, therefore, secondary. Of course, to propose, as I have done, that justice and mercy are an inseparable unity further complicates the picture.

[144] A simplified account of faith might include the process of revelation (knowledge of God), belief (response to God), and participation (existence in God, a transformation of life according to God).

and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars,"[145] and that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."[146] Faith and justice are inseparable components of a unified experience.

The "immersion in love" that entails this experience is the contemplative act which is also, as previously discussed, virtually identical to the prophetic experience when one understands the encounter of the human and the divine in a dialectic of mutual concern (as understood by Heschel).[147] Contemplatives, therefore, have something of prophets within them, and so their task should resemble the prophetic task of iconoclasm and inexhaustible exhortations to justice and genuine love.

The Place and Role of Contemplation

Insofar as any Christian vocation is a search for the fulfilment of love, even the most silent and secluded expressions of Christian life require an uncompromising attention to both mercy and justice. We have seen that the contemplative life, even the cloistered contemplative life, is fundamentally oriented around compassion. The contemplative becomes, through contemplation, more aware of the world's needs.[148] As Sr. Martha Juskewycz, a Trappist nun from Mississippi Abbey, describes, "we can hear the pain of the whole world in the silence."[149] Compassion was also a central component of the contemplative life according to Bernard of Clairvaux. Without it, the contemplative would not know any truth beyond the truth of their own "wretched condition" before God, not yet understanding God in fulness or directly.[150]

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[145] 1 Jn 4:20 (NRSV)
[146] Js 2:17 (NRSV)
[147] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 624-625.
[148] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 12.
[149] Martha Juskewycz, "The Chosen," Trappist Brothers and Sisters, last modified 4 May 2018, https://www.trappists.org/history-of-the-trappists/teachings-of-the-trappists/teachings-modern-cistercians/
[150] Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride,* trans. Barton R.V. Mills, Chapter 3.

As such, contemplation requires some grounding in the realities of the pain of the world. For both Merton and Ellacuría, this means involvement in the struggles of the outcast that implies an adoption of that struggle for justice and liberation as one's own. Ellacuría writes:

> Others, especially if they are among the oppressed, are in themselves the sacrament of Christ, the historical body of Christ, the history of his crucified divinity; but they are not considered as such in a static or symbolic way, but rather in the reality of their concrete situation, in their anguishes and sufferings, in their struggles for liberation. They are the place in which contemplation should focus. They should not be taken as the objects of contemplation, but as a reality that empowers one and obligates one to partake in their historical course and personal problems. This requires, therefore, an immersion in who they are and what they do.[151]

"Contemplation," thus expressed, is the awareness of that love that compels one to greater solidarity and more authentic compassion that overflows into liberative action, resistance. It is the response to the unity of faith and justice.[152]

The need for justice, particularly that compassionate justice oriented towards the oppressed, to permeate any authentic Christian love is the central theme of many of Merton's reflections later in life.[153] The compassion requires a kind of identification, the true immersion in the struggles of the downtrodden. Recall that Merton saw the slum, what he considered the height of alienation, to be the modern context of contemplation, the modern desert. Here we can

[151] Ellacuría, *Fe y Justicia,* 208-209. Translation mine.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Even in a cloistered life where action for social justice is limited practically to speech, it is unacceptable for the contemplative to be closed to the world—they must be fully immersed in it, identified with its problems. The contemplative, furthermore, has something to offer to the ailing world for its improvement, and to refuse to engage in the struggles of the world despite holding this privileged position of knowing love as a concretized abstraction is, in some way, to forego a responsibility, to damage one's innocence. In the preface to his curated journals collected and arranged in the 1968 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* Merton reflects that even immersed in thinking about the problems of the world, a person with a "monastic commitment" is "inevitably… something of a 'bystander.'" (*Conjectures,* xviii)

begin to see the bridge between Merton's attention to the contemplative life's resolution of alienation and his belief that love seeks expression in action for justice.[154]

Merton and Ellacuría both acknowledge that the Christian must respond to a social sin. Injustice is present in the structure of society. The Christian is required by love to resist this structure. For Ellacuría, effective resistance is also necessarily structural; it is a redefinition of the society for a more just and equitable existence. It is a collective material endeavor that takes on spiritual significance insofar as it responds to and flows from the spiritual reality of love.

For Merton, resistance follows similar material-spiritual dynamics, but it is more individualized. In the prayerful self-discovery of a contemplative life, the contemplative resolves alienations, resists their own reduction and that of others, affirms their dignity by virtue of the presence of God of which they grow increasingly aware.

Effective resistance means the construction of a Christian self that refuses its placement in an unjust society that serves as a distorter of humanity. The Christian identity, to Merton, is defined in its opposition to a mass structure that reduces the human to a godless drone. Because this mass structure is also one that creates and needs the slum, that thrives on a juxtaposition of affluent and destitute, powerful and oppressed, legitimate and criminal, etc., resistance to this structure, and especially the construction of an identity based on this resistance, necessarily involves an attention to social justice,[155] and it does so necessarily because it requires an immersion in God, a God known through love that both spurns and resolves alienation. This is

[154] In light of all of these reflections, it is important to note that like Bernard, Merton is not claiming that the contemplative life must of necessity develop into social action. There is certainly a place for the cloistered, silent contemplative in Merton's understanding of the contemplative life. But this cloistered contemplative must be open to the world and immersed in the struggles of the oppressed in the sense that their contemplation is authentically compassionate. They must not consider themselves to have left a contemptible world for the purity of the cloister, but must be intimately linked to the world, "in the world," by virtue of their identification with its struggles.
[155] Here one might identify a detailed modern adaptation of the Bernardine belief that the "best" life is the mixed life, the apostolic life that flows from contemplation.

the locus of contemplation. The construction of the Christian is simultaneously self-discovery and self-denial, the finding of life by losing it. It is an interiority that demands externalization. It is by finding God within the self, and rooting the self in God, that God becomes visible in the world and asks the Christian to reveal Him further.

Conclusion

One concept we have not fully elaborated, probably because of the insufficiency of any formal discussion on the matter, is that of a Christian's surrender to mystery, which often demands a self-abandonment to paradox. A spiritual paradox is itself paradoxical: in its paradox, and only so, it is profound coherence. In spiritual mystery there exists near-total certainty experienced as an almost pre-primal instinct. But true mystery, existential mystery, that kind with which contemplation is concerned, is indescribable, it is that thing toward which analogy points, but for which analogy is hopelessly insufficient.

The Christian mystery is that of the possibility of total unity between human and God. It is a mystery experienced, to use a hopelessly insufficient analogy, in the "depths of one's being," in a consciousness that is at once supremely individual and totally devoid of self-reference. It exists in a life that is found only when one's life is given up for God's sake.[156] It is, as it were, pure humanity, the "essence" of being human. And in this condition, the mystery can't help but to generalize; not in a conventional way—to generalize in this context means to equalize, but at an infinite level of importance. Every human, subject to that same mystery, a sharer of the same essence, is immediately understood as a co-participant in the mystery, a part of the same body probing the mystery for unseen answers, those incapable of being discerned but whose confusion is consolation.

Any affront to a human, a sharer of that essence that is immersion in the mystery and *is* itself mystery, is an affront to the mystery itself.

I hope the reader will forgive me for having perhaps ventured into the realm of the mythologized in order to make an important dynamic clear (I hope, also, that the convolutedness

[156] Mt 10:39

of the mythologized language made it more, rather than less, palatable, since it should have reflected that faith is a confused love rather than any kind of certainty or security). The point to be made is not a novel insight. It is simply an affirmation that love of God and love of humanity are the same thing. The implications of taking seriously this central concept of the Judeo-Christian religion are the answers to the question that inspired, guided, and flowed throughout this thesis: one cannot love God without loving one's neighbor, and one cannot hope to understand (with all of the complexities, shortfalls, and imprecisions of this word) God without an immersion in the mundane. It is an insight heralded by Bernard of Clairvaux, touted also by the Radical Theologians, put into action by Heschel and Ellacuría, and that drove every concept of contemplation in Merton's monastic life.

The contemplative exists for the world because the world and God are inseparable. The spiritual needs of humanity are affected by the modern person's material conditions (among them are also the quasi-material conditions: exclusion, objectification, etc.), and the spiritual orientation of modernity will determine the construction of society. "Spiritual orientation" is essentially openness to love.

If a contemplative can be compared to a prophet as one particularly aware of the voice and inner workings of God, perhaps Heschel's description of the prophet might illuminate the "Mertoniain contemplative": "To the prophet… no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man… In the prophet's message, nothing that has bearing over good and evil is small or trite in the eyes of God."[157] The prophet "is incapable of isolating the world. There is an interaction between man and God which to disregard is an act of insolence. Isolation is a fairy tale."[158] The prophet, having a privileged access to God, is therefore steeped in divine love. The

[157] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 6.
[158] Ibid., 19.

contemplative, steeped in divine love, cannot help but to love the world as it is, to remind us of the horrors of injustice and the hope for conversion. Immersed in the world, they are to be messengers of that love in an unwavering commitment to making it manifest in terms acceptable to the world, in a relentless pursuit of iconoclastic authenticity. Love will not tolerate any distortion. To bring contemplation into the modern context means finding within modern alienation a spiritual desert conducive to spiritual renewal. It means humbly accepting a pervasive dissatisfaction with religion as a kind of reconciliatory solidarity. It means returning a sense of dignity to humanity plagued by oppression. It means, most of all, to restore to God a face of love that can be seen by all while God remains mysteriously invisible.

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Biography

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